JANUARY 24 2026

FT Weekend Magazine

TWILIGHT OF THE HUMANITARIANS

BY HENRY MANCE

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SHUWEI LIU

ON THE COVER
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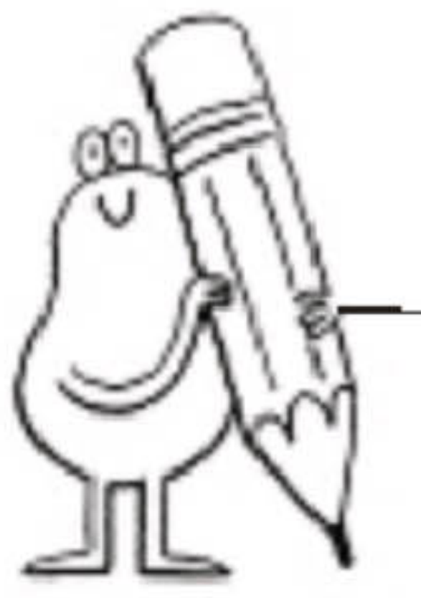
USING A SCREENSHOT OF A VIDEO POSTED
ON SOCIAL MEDIA BY THE RSF



MARGINALIA *by* NADINE REDLICH

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Publishing Dorota Gwilliam – Global Director, Luxury & Weekend Portfolio – dorota.gwilliam@ft.com
Isaac Peltz – Commercial sales & product manager – isaac.peltz@ft.com. Sadia Choudhury – Advertising sales executive – sadia.choudhury@ft.com **Production** Mark Frisby – Advertising production – mark.frisby@ft.com/magscopy@ft.com

Letters

THE MARATHON, THE ALGORITHM AND ME
by Tim Harford

Tim Harford's piece was fascinating, and highlights the quanta/qualia tension in being tethered to sportswear technologies.

It's up to us as masters of our own destiny, though, not to become algorithmically ruled. Mixing up routines between different disciplines should be more overtly recognised: swimming, cycling, circuits and so on aren't recognised by devices as generating "steps" but are equally valid in terms of health benefits, especially if you have injuries or wear and tear that prevent you from running.

CHRISTOPHER MORETON,
THRAPSTON, NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

I hate taking my phone when I go running. I will use it as any old excuse for stopping when I should be running further. The pings and other noises are another irritant and distraction. Henry David Thoreau in 1854 talked about people becoming "the tools of their tools".

BLUNDERBOSS VIA FT.COM

REWATCHING *THE WIRE*
by Kabir Chibber

Thanks for this great article. It made me think about Mr Trump more closely. In nearly 40 years of general medical practice, I have only once met a person remotely like him, a very frightening gentleman who I was relieved to lose to the care of Her Majesty's prison service. The downside to the article however is that I now have five seasons of *The Wire* to plough through. Still, it beats running, eh Tim?

JULLIEN WALKLEY, BURNAGE, MANCHESTER

Interesting article, but I think it overlooks the main, more prosaic reason the show has faded from popular culture these days. It was conceived as a novel on television. This made it very different from most TV dramas, a much more rewarding, immersive viewing experience in which each episode was akin to a chapter of a book. But this also meant those episodes didn't work so well as standalone viewing, which was always going to limit the rewatch potential compared with other shows with more self-contained episodes, which are easier to dip back into.

TAM LANIADO, LONDON

WIKIPEDIA AT 25
by Darren Loucaides

Fantastic article on the incomparable, not-for-profit Wikipedia. And it reminded me to make my 2026 donation, which I would encourage other FT readers and lovers of (relatively) unbiased information to do.

MIDDLEMAN67 VIA FT.COM

THE WONDER OF THE CAST-IRON SKILLET
by Tim Hayward

Thanks for using this entire article to lever in recipes for fried chicken and cornbread. Looking forward to it!

PEDEL VIA FT.COM

I've used cast-iron skillets for more than 50 years, a Le Creuset enamelled one and a beautiful black Staub one that is not enamelled. I'm French and I live in France. No one I know has ever seasoned their cast-iron skillets. They are both more than 30 years old. The Creuset one has traces of wear on the enamel; the Staub one is impeccable. When some food sticks to the pan, I put boiling water in it, more than once if necessary. I clean them just as I do other pans, with a brush and the usual detergent.

JR-FRENCHCASSANDRA VIA FT.COM

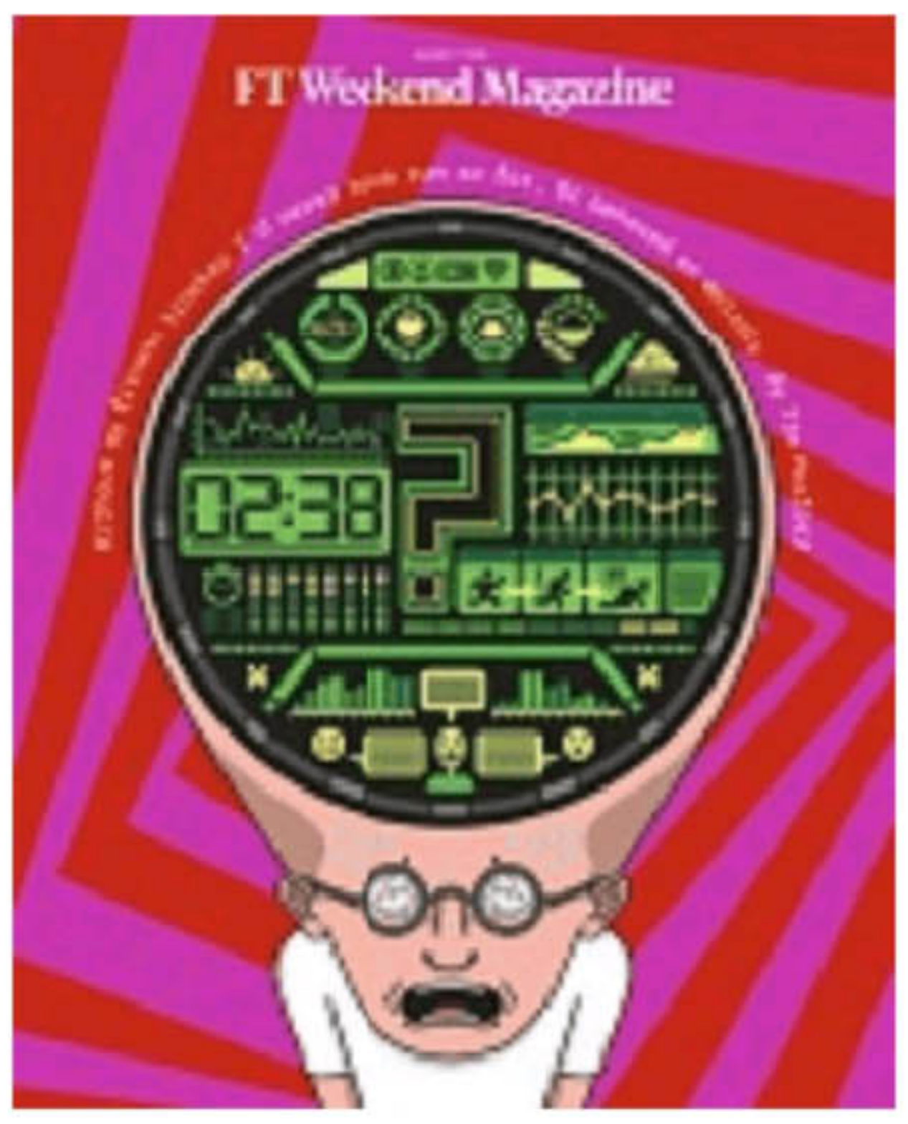
WHEN SCIENCE IS BUILT ON LIES
by Tim Harford

"Are you sure?", a frequent retort from my Uncle Mike, 80 this week, seems worth holding on to. A little-known and refreshingly readable book I'm also holding on to is *Apes in Lab Coats* by Dennis Lendrem in which, if it's facts you're after, the importance of the design of an experiment is stressed, repeatedly.

SARAH REDSTON, OXFORD

"It ain't necessarily so" should be Tim Harford's leitmotif. Thanks for another Harford exercise in clear and judicious thinking, which has made me look at one of my old favourites, the Robbers Cave experiment, in a new light. I bet I am not alone. When done well, science is the best thing we have. But in the words of George Gershwin's Sporting Life. "I takes that Gospel whenever it's possible. But with a grain of salt."

KEIR HARTLEY, WORTHING



JANUARY 17
FITNESS TRACKER WEIRDNESS

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DEPARTMENTS

Only the US is listed as "Countries that have lost wars against Vietnamese rice farmers". This might come as a surprise to the French. Dien Bien Phu?

ROBERT ROBINSON, LONDON

In the postwar period, at least two states can claim to have lost wars against forces consisting primarily of Vietnamese troops: France in the First Indochina War (1946-1954) and the Khmer Rouge, which was removed from power by a Vietnamese invasion in 1979. It is also worth noting that both China and Vietnam claim victory in the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979. Additionally, the notion that the US was defeated by "Vietnamese rice farmers" reflects a pervasive myth that has been largely debunked by historians. While guerrilla campaigns were important, the conventional North Vietnamese Army played a decisive role in the conflict, especially after 1968.

DR GEORGE BODIE, LECTURER IN HISTORY,
GOLDSMITHS, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

THE IMPOTENCE OF EUROPE'S GOVERNING ELITE
by Simon Kuper

A thought-provoking and chilling article. Has TS Eliot's *The Hollow Men* ever been more prescient?

MICHAEL MORGAN, KIRK ELLA, HULL

An excellent piece from Simon Kuper on our governing elite. The Chinese politburo is full of qualified engineers. In the US, anything goes once you have enough money. In the EU we suffer from incompetence and populism. Maybe I should seek elected office at 62 years old!

PAUL DORAN, CLONDALKIN, DUBLIN

Maximum kudos to the person who created the image. "Inaction man" – excellent!

SIMON VIA FT.COM

↩ Damn, I thought I could buy one of those! In euros and only from a store in Brussels that isn't open on Sundays, of course.

DARTMOOR PONY VIA FT.COM

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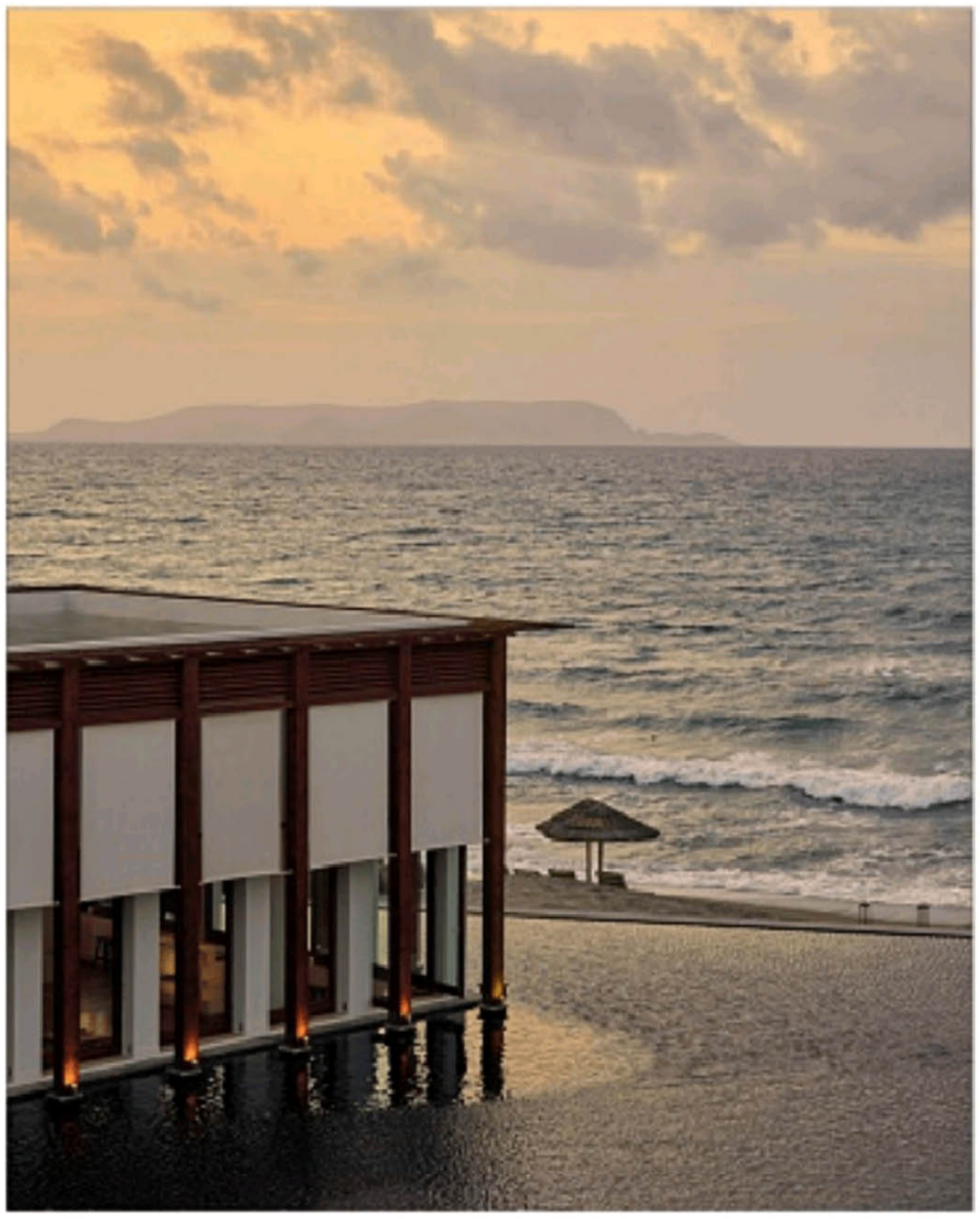
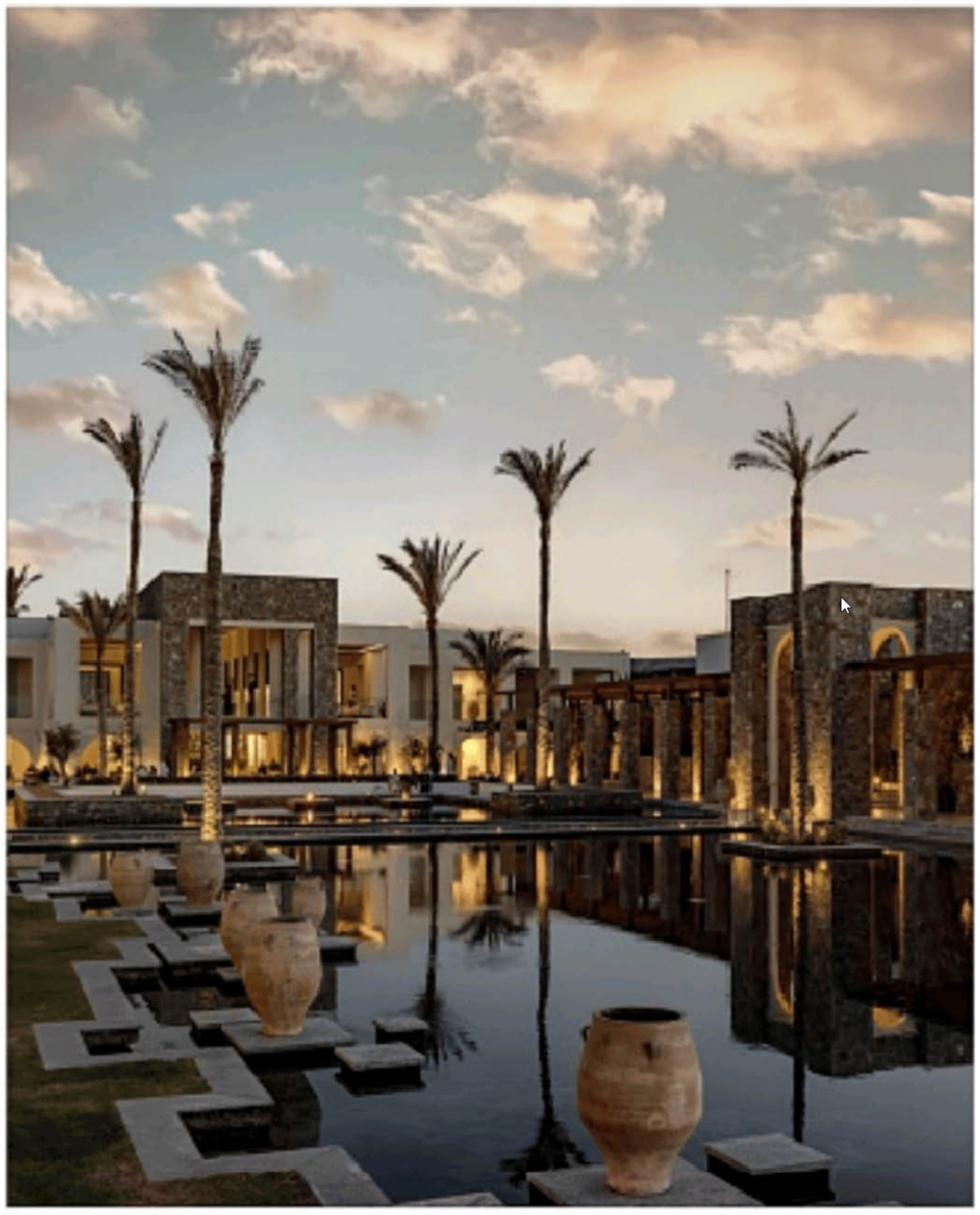
A RESORT TO LIVE





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Intellect

Undercover Economist

The meaningful life

by TIM HARFORD

ILLUSTRATION *by* ALBERTO MIRANDA

In the late 1930s, the Roosevelt administration embarked on a curious project. Officials hired thousands of unemployed writers to produce guidebooks, children's books, local histories, collections of folklore and a variety of other essays. Some of these writers were, or would become, American greats such as May Swenson, Ralph Ellison, Studs Terkel and Saul Bellow. Many others were more "writers" than writers: literate white-collar workers such as lawyers and librarians who were in desperate need of gainful employment.

This Federal Writers Project was just a tiny part of Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration, which aimed to do much the same thing on a grander scale: find something useful for millions of unemployed Americans to do and pay them to do it. One of its outputs was *American Life Histories*, nearly 3,000 recollections of Americans, typically the elderly. Many of these were retellings of folk stories or local history, but about half were autobiographical. Venerable citizens reflected on their lives while being interviewed by a government-employed writer.

Even if the main goal of the project was to give literate workers something remunerative to do, the resulting archive – several million words – is fascinating: chapter-length stories of life in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Some of the interviewees were born in slavery; some lived lives of hardship and violence; some had flourished.

Minnie Marshall told her interviewer that her father had died at sea before she ever knew him and her mother died when Minnie was 14. She married at 16, but her husband abandoned her – after knocking her front teeth out and taking all the money. At the age of 34 – although looking much older – Minnie worked as a maid, grinding out a living in New York City. "Whut ah'm gonna do? Ah got to live."

Elmo Acosta had a more fortunate existence, interviewed at the age of 66 while working as a grocer in Jacksonville, Florida. Elmo had worked as city councillor and parks commissioner and proudly recalled his role in expanding the city's parks, planting "holly, oak and magnolia trees as a memorial to the soldiers of the [first] World War" and making it possible to build a bridge across the river – the St Elmo Acosta Bridge is still standing.

Very different stories – and there are hundreds more in the archives. Last year three economists, David Lagakos, Stelios Michalopoulos and Hans-Joachim Voth, analysed these life histories with the goal of assessing what people had identified as significant or meaningful in their lives.

> The three most miserable activities were the evening commute, the morning commute and work itself

The received wisdom is that social connections are what make life worth living. Life gets its meaning from the quality of friendships, family ties and other social relationships.

American Life Histories suggests a slightly broader lesson. The stories people told about themselves, and especially the stories women told about themselves, did indeed often mention friends and family. But they also emphasised, over and over again, the importance of work as a foundation for a meaningful life.

Maybe this says something about the fact that the stories were collected against a backdrop of worklessness – not to mention as an antidote to it. But there is a more general lesson to be learnt about our puzzling relationship with work, and a lesson that will prove particularly useful if AI dislocates the labour market.

The puzzle is that we have a love-hate relationship with working for a living. Look closely and you find that people do not tend to enjoy their work. Step back and you find that they can't do without it.

Twenty years ago, a team of social scientists, including Alan Krueger, an economist, and Daniel Kahneman, a Nobel laureate psychologist, investigated the wellbeing of nearly 1,000 employed women living in Texas. Kahneman and Krueger asked these women to reconstruct a recent day, episode by episode, and to rate the emotions experienced during meals, stretches of childcare, commuting and so on. Emotional labels included "happy", "enjoying myself", "annoyed", "depressed" and "anxious".

A Douglas Adams character once ruefully reflected about his job that the hours were good but "most of the actual minutes are pretty lousy". The point of Kahneman and Krueger's research was to examine that distinction, directing people away from grand evaluations of their lives and towards the moment-to-moment experiences of which life is made.

Their day reconstruction method suggests that the three activities most likely to elicit positive emotions in these women were relaxing, socialising after work and, best of all, sex. The three most miserable activities were the evening commute, the morning commute and work itself. Work was simply the least enjoyable thing in their lives.

Yet to return to that puzzle, one of the most robust findings in social science is that when we ask people to evaluate their lives overall, there are few more reliable sources of dissatisfaction and disappointment than being unemployed. This isn't just about money: the swings in life-satisfaction are much greater than income alone would explain.

Why is this? One revealing study conducted in Germany found that long-term unemployed people gave much more positive evaluations of their lives once they hit retirement age – presumably because unemployment signified failure or laziness, whereas retirement did not have the same stigma.

Another piece of evidence, from the UK, is that the psychic cost of being unemployed seems to be lower when regional unemployment rates rise: the more other people are unemployed, the less you look or feel bad for being unemployed yourself.

All this seems painfully relevant in a world where there is so much talk about AI taking our jobs. Which is ironic, since Lagakos and his colleagues did not read millions of words of *American Life Histories*, nor even ask their research assistants to do so. Instead, they tweaked ChatGPT until it was delivering answers that were indistinguishable from human reviewers on a small subset of these memoirs. Then they unleashed the chatbot on the entire corpus.

American Life Histories began as a Depression-era make-work project for white-collar Americans and has been analysed by AI tools which were cheaper than human researchers, to produce the conclusion that work is profoundly important. If you don't find that darkly funny, I'm sure we can ask ChatGPT to explain the joke. FT

DEPARTMENTS

REPORTS *from* LESSER-KNOWN FT BUREAUX

DRAMATIC IRONY

Be careful what you wish for

"All the famous people had had an awful time. One of them had a drunken father. Another had a stammer. Another had to wash hundreds of dirty bottles. They had all had what was called a difficult childhood. Clearly you had to have one if you wanted to become famous."
– Judith Kerr, in her semi-autobiographical novel "When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit". The protagonist reacts jealously to a book about the early lives of influential people... which she is reading while fleeing Nazi Germany with her family.

SOURCE: *WHEN HITLER STOLE PINK RABBIT*, 1971

POLITICS

For the record

First-week sales of memoirs by British prime ministers in the 21st century

- Tony Blair – 92,060 copies in four days
- Boris Johnson – 42,528 copies
- David Cameron – 20,792 copies
- Theresa May – 3,520 copies
- Gordon Brown – 3,309 copies
- Liz Truss – 2,228 copies

SOURCE: VARIOUS

PUBLISHING

Walk it back

"After a turbulent year, Raynor Winn embarks on the Coast to Coast Walk in winter, unexpectedly alone. Despite 45 years of walking together, setbacks in her husband, Moth's, health have led him to see his decline as inevitable, which Raynor refuses to accept... Navigating harsh weather and tangled emotions, Raynor reflects on the mountains they've climbed. Her journey becomes a meditation on our connection to the land and its power to help us remember, rebuild, and reclaim what is lost."
– Publisher's summary of Raynor Winn's fourth book, "On Winter Hill", whose 2025 publication has been delayed by a year after an Observer investigation into "The Salt Path"

SOURCE: PENGUIN.CO.UK

LAST WEEK'S THEME: EXCEPTIONALISM

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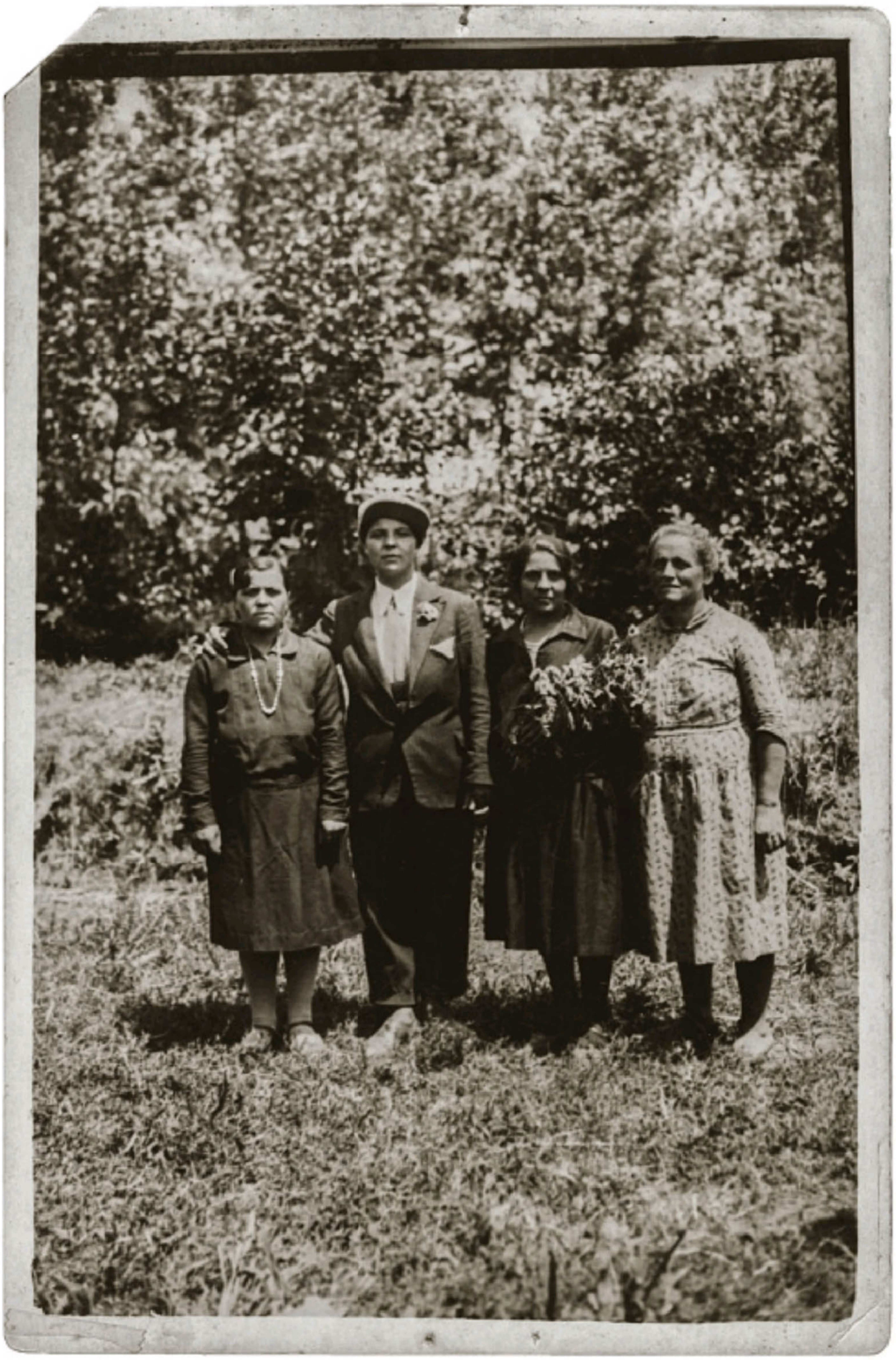


FROM ABOVE: ARCHIVE PHOTO; 'LEILA, SARNO'; UNTITLED

GALLERY

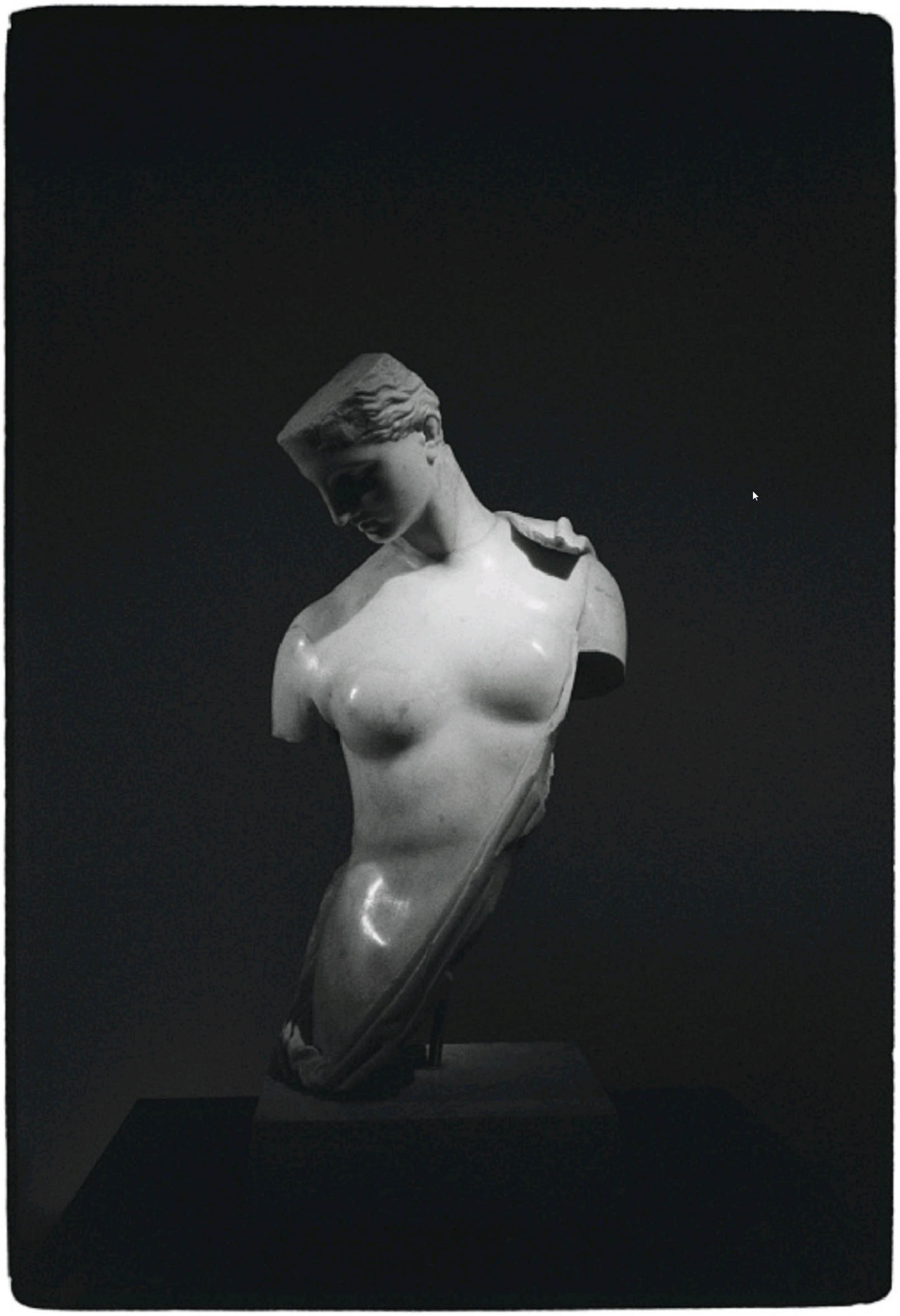
ROMAN MANFREDI

by JOSH LUSTIG

It came from a chance discovery 30 years ago. In a shoe-box of old family photographs, artist Roman Manfredi came across an image that stuck in her mind. Four women, including Manfredi's grandmother, stand side-by-side in the northern Italian countryside. Three are wearing dresses and jewellery – Manfredi's *nonna* holds a bunch of flowers – but a fourth wears a man's suit and tie, complete with pocket square, flower in the lapel and baker-boy hat.

"As a queer person and, more specifically, a masculine-presenting female, I was used to going through old family photographs and not seeing myself," Manfredi tells me. "I lived in a sense of duality regarding my Italian rural ancestry and my British urban life. When I came across this photo, it was a huge jolt because these women looked proud. That moment of visibility had a powerful impact."

It led Manfredi to Naples to work on a project on the *femminielli*, a third-gender community that plays an important role in traditional Neapolitan culture. "The *femminielli* were very much part of the fabric of working-class life," Manfredi



says, "taking part in pagan as well as Catholic traditions and rituals," adding that they are "noted as auspicious, bringing fun, performance and celebration, with roots going back centuries".

Expecting to focus solely on *femminielli*, Manfredi was surprised at how many *masculille* (natal females who present as male) she encountered. "After meeting some [of them] through the Neapolitan rapper Jelecrois, I decided to include *masculille* in the project as a way of addressing the clear historical invisibility of female-born gender non-conforming people."

Manfredi was struck by the number of prominent contemporary Neapolitan pop stars and rappers who are masculine-presenting lesbians. "Naples is full of contradictions that co-exist, much of which is unspoken."

Leila, pictured here, was the first person Manfredi photographed for the project, which is titled *Tra*, an Italian word meaning "between". Staring directly down the lens, wearing a shirt that seems both masculine and feminine, Leila stands strong. Even the wall behind, with its rough plaster and diamond pattern reminiscent of the harlequin, hints at transformation and transgression.

The marble bust, which Manfredi photographed at the National Archaeological Museum of Naples, was originally meant to be a research image, but as the project developed, the statue's gender ambiguity took on greater significance. FT

Roman Manfredi is one of two recipients of the fifth edition of the Jerwood/Photoworks Awards. "Tra" is at the Drawing Room and Tannery Arts, London, until February 8, drawingroom.org.uk

World View

After Greenland

by SIMON KUPER

ILLUSTRATION by HARRY HAYSOM

Sanewashers – the people who try to rationalise everything Donald Trump does – haven't given up. Now they are explaining that he wants Greenland for security and/or minerals. Contradicting this argument, however, is Trump's own early account of his obsession. In 2021, he told the authors of *The Divider*, a book about his first presidential term: "I'm a real estate developer. I look at a corner, I say, 'I've got to get that store for the building that I'm building,' etc. It's not that different... I love maps. And I always said: 'Look at the size of this [Greenland]. It's massive. That should be part of the United States.'" Trump embodies the new geopolitical trend: international relations is increasingly about real estate.

Land is the great prize of our time. Even as our economy becomes dematerialised, and our lives virtual, our obsessions just get more earthly. The McKinsey Global Institute has estimated that land, plus the housing and commercial property on top of it, account for about two-thirds of the world's $520tn of real wealth.

Real estate has long been a driver of domestic politics. The fact that only some people have housing wealth and can afford to live in strong job markets fuels inequality, the rural-urban and generational divides. House prices also feed anxiety over immigration (which raises competition for homes) and reduce fertility (because young people can't afford enough space to have children). Much of this argument is outlined in the essay "The Housing Theory of Everything" by John Myers, Sam Bowman and Ben Southwood. But real estate's merging with international relations is more recent.

The no-holds-barred fight for land that encompasses most of history paused with decolonisation in the 1960s, but restarted in 2014 when Vladimir Putin invaded Crimea. Now the US, like Russia, is returning to its national tradition: expansion through land grabs. This lust for land is driven by various trends, argues Michael Albertus of the University of Chicago, author of the new book *Land Power*. I spoke to him at last month's Grand Continent conference in Aosta, Italy.

First, ever more people are competing for land. Just in my lifetime, since 1969, the global population has jumped from about 3.6 billion to 8.2 billion. The UN projects it will peak at 10.3 billion in the 2080s. One cause of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for instance, is the 10-fold increase in Israel's population since 1948 to 10.2 million.

> The US, like Russia, is returning to its national tradition: expansion through land grabs

Trend two: climate change is reshuffling the value of the world's land. The US real-estate website Zillow used to track this issue by publishing climate-risk scores for homes but, perhaps coincidentally, ditched the scores after estate agents complained they hurt sales. Only the brave or misinformed are still buying in South Florida, whereas the warming Arctic looks like a freshly delivered new neighbourhood, ready for habitation. In real-estate jargon, Greenland now "has potential", as do northern Russia and Canada. Centuries hence, when Trump's personal idiosyncrasies begin to fade from memory, historians might say that what we lived through in January 2026 was the start of the scramble for the Arctic. Bits of Antarctica could be next.

The third factor driving land grabs, says Albertus, is that the taboo on them is fading – or perhaps, in the cases of Trump and Putin, has vanished. Trump's plan for the "Gaza Riviera" recasts 19th-century imperialism in the language of 21st-century real estate. And here is how he describes his "peace proposal" to give Russia chunks of Ukraine: "You're cutting up land in a certain way, it's not the easiest thing, it's like a complex real estate deal times a thousand." European policymakers, who started 2026 still imagining the taboo existed, are hastily updating their worldview.

Putting all these trends together, Albertus sees a "Great Reshuffle" of the world's land. That happens periodically in history: think of the 19th-century "Scramble for Africa", or the "Barbarian migrations" by Germanic tribes that destroyed the late Roman Empire. This time, the likely chief grabbers are the US, China and Russia, plus possibly Iran as "water bankrupt" Tehran ceases to be habitable.

Land grabs could lose intensity after 2100, when falling birthrates shrink the world's population. But even then, climate change should keep people moving. A century from now, giant Nigeria might be bullying the US for the Alaskan Riviera.

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FOR THE ACHIEVERS

Capital at risk.

Essay

The answer machines

Universities trained students to produce polished responses on demand. Then AI learnt the same trick.

By *Brendan McCord*

ILLUSTRATION *by* FORTUNATE JOAQUIN

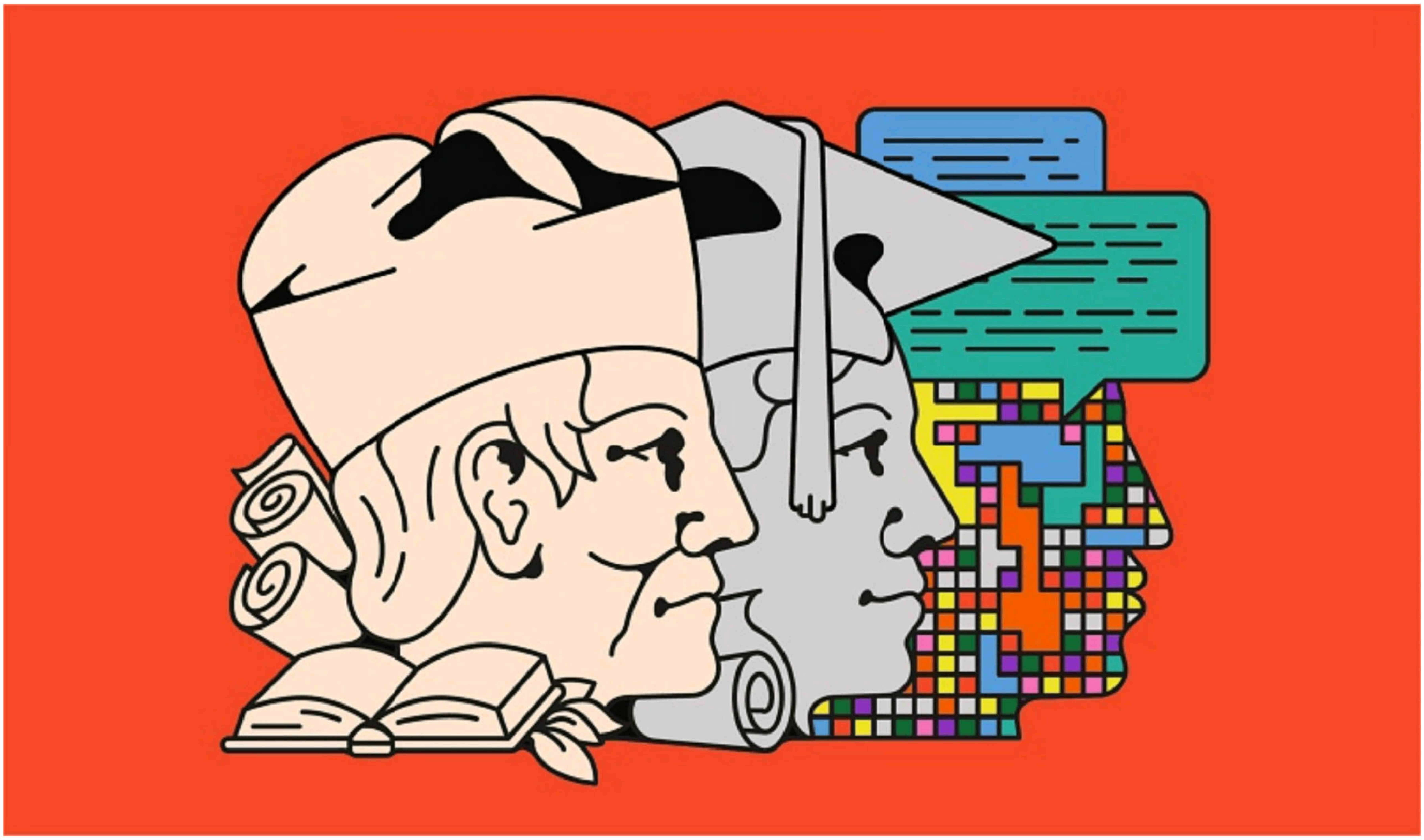
Every spring, I take red-eyes from Austin, Texas, to Oxford, England, to teach a graduate seminar on AI and philosophy. When I land, I change into a suit and a tie, something I never did as a start-up founder. Crossing the lawns of St Catherine's College, I feel like an actor stepping into costume.

In the seminar room, the students are already seated. Rhodes scholars, philosophers, MIT-trained computer scientists. The kind of people who will build the next generation of AI. Each week, we pair old questions with new technologies: we read Plato or Mill, then hear from someone at Google DeepMind or Midjourney about what's newly possible.

When my students have done the reading, they can summarise any argument with precision. Ask one to explain Mill's harm principle and you'll get a clear, accurate account. But ask whether autonomy really matters the way Mill says it does - both for what it produces and for what it means to be human - and the room falls silent.

After class, a few of us walk through Oxford's streets to dinner. I ask what they actually think about something we discussed. Not what the philosopher thinks, what they think. A student hesitates. "I guess I'd need to read more about it first." We just spent two hours reading about it. Another tells me she's writing a paper for a different course. I ask what questions it raises for her. Silence. She's stacking arguments, not weighing them.

Over dessert, someone asks what he should do with his career. This question is always on their



minds. I tell him about Benjamin Franklin, the philosopher-builder, someone who moved between ideas and action. Find problems that matter. Think deeply about them. Develop the skill to translate ideas into reality. He nods. "So would you try a start-up or go the DPhil route?" He wants me to choose.

These are some of the best-trained students in the world. They're answer machines. But not all of them. Later that term, a student stays after class. She's been troubled by something we'd been taking for granted: that exposure to diverse viewpoints produces better judgment. "What if it doesn't?" she asks. "What if most people just pick the view that feels right and get better at defending it?" She hasn't resolved anything. She's opened a question that unsettles her.

I don't blame the others. It's the same tension I felt fastening my tie. We're all playing the parts we were taught. For decades, universities have been mass-producing scholars who can navigate libraries, write polished essays and answer every prompt on cue. We called them educated. Then AI learnt to do the same: faster, smoother, better.

What AI automates isn't thought but performance. And that should unsettle us, because it reveals how much of what we called scholarship had already become ritual.

TWENTY-FOUR CENTURIES AGO, SOCRATES asked a young mathematician named Theaetetus: "What is knowledge?" Theaetetus answered: "Knowledge is perception." Socrates didn't correct him. He questioned him. Theaetetus tried again: "Knowledge is true belief." A jury can be persuaded to true belief by a clever lawyer – do they have knowledge? Three times Theaetetus answered. Three times the answer failed. The dialogue ends without a definition. But something has happened.

Thinking, Socrates said, is the soul's dialogue with itself. Thought is not the production of answers but the dynamics of inquiry. To think is to question. A view is only as strong as the questions it can withstand. If thinking is questioning, then learning to think means learning to ask better questions. Yet our dominant forms of assessment (exams, problem sets, essays) treat questions as static inputs. The teacher asks, the student answers.

Consider a typical essay prompt: "Explain Mill's case for free speech." The student lays out the argument. But whether they questioned Mill's assumptions (for example, whether his argument presumes a kind of person that most cultures don't produce) goes unassessed. Students learn to work within inherited boundaries, not to examine how those boundaries were drawn.

The great thinkers didn't just answer questions better. They recast the questions themselves. Tocqueville didn't ask, "Is democracy desirable?" (the dominant European debate). He asked what it does to character, liberty and thought. The question was the insight.

Why did we end up assessing answers instead of questions? Because answers are legible, and questions are not.

The library was progress. It democratised knowledge, embodying the Enlightenment promise of learning freed from church and crown. But in liberating us from visible authority, the library created a subtler form. We replaced the priest's pulpit with the curator's catalogue. Where the priest's authority was obvious, the curator's disappeared into the structure itself.

AI represents a third shift. Its authority is neither visible nor structural, but dynamic and ambient, the autocomplete for life. The priest told you what to think. The library told you where to look. AI generates the thinking and lets you believe it's your own. Unlike the library, a place you entered and left, AI mediates vast stretches of waking life. The work of discernment, once handled by priests and then by institutions, is now ours completely. Kant's challenge returns: *Sapere aude*. Have the courage to use your own understanding.

BUT WE NEVER LEARNT TO DO IT. WE LEARNT to perform it instead. You remember the formula from school. Thesis statement, underlined in your draft. Three reasons why, each in its own paragraph. A conclusion that began with "In conclusion" until your teacher told you to stop. Announce what you'll prove, prove it, remind them you proved it.

Later, in college, the essays got longer. Conclusions were announced by "thus", "ultimately", "as this analysis has shown". But the formula held. A good essay announced its destination in the first paragraph and arrived there in the last. That was rigour.

Montaigne gave us the essay as the opposite. An *essai*, an attempt. Not-knowing that moves toward understanding through the act of writing itself. His essays circle, digress, contradict themselves. That's what thinking looks like when you're doing it rather than performing it. You can watch him change his mind. *Que sais-je*? What do I know? He meant it.

> What if, instead of turning in finished essays, students turned in evidence of their thinking?

We turned his *essai* into a genre of false certainty. Students learn to have a thesis before they write, to know their conclusion before exploring their question, to treat writing as transcription of completed thoughts rather than the medium through which thought happens. We trained them to produce answers on demand, not to show the work of thinking. Then we wonder why they let ChatGPT do it for them.

If AI can produce polished text instantly, we can no longer pretend that polished text is what matters. We must return to what Montaigne knew: the essay is a process, not a product. What if, instead of turning in essays, students turned in evidence of their thinking? Document your dialogue with AI. Show where you questioned it, where verification changed your argument, where your thinking shifted. The intellectual moves that used to happen invisibly now leave a traceable record.

I saw a version of this last term. One student traced her attempt to understand Mill's arguments for free speech. She started by summarising the position. Then she pushed back on something the AI asserted about the "marketplace of ideas". She wasn't sure the metaphor held. She asked what happens when the marketplace floods with noise. The AI answered confidently; she didn't buy it. She found a counter-argument, then a counter-counter-argument. Her final position was messier than her first. But you could see her thinking.

Students can perform process too, of course. But performance collapses under questioning. Ask them to defend one pivot – why did you change your mind here? – and the difference between theatre and thought becomes obvious. That's what matters. The hesitancy. The false starts. The moments where something clicks and the whole argument pivots. The rawness that comes from working something out. Answer machines follow the formula. Thinkers leave traces of their quest.

Montaigne's essays showed thinking in motion across his lifetime; you can see him changing his mind in the margins. AI makes this visible for any student. We can finally assess not whether someone produced the right answer, but whether they thought.

What if I gave students not a prompt but a map, the questions serious thinkers have found generative, the dependencies between them? Then asked where they lingered, where they doubled back. The essay becomes a record of inquiry, not a proof of arrival.

THE GREAT THINKERS WERE NEVER OPTIMISTIC that most people would think. Plato thought the many would stay in the cave. Mill doubted that anyone but a cultivated few could recognise higher pleasures. Nietzsche spoke of the herd. They saw genuine thinking as rare, perhaps permanently so. Universities sustained its possibility anyway. They preserved great works and trained some minds to grapple with them seriously.

AI forces us to ask whether we accept that permanent division between the few who think and the many who do not. Perhaps most people will always outsource judgment to something: priest, library, machine. But I don't believe it. Not because I'm especially optimistic about human nature, but because I've seen what happens when the question becomes unavoidable. The student who stayed after class, troubled by what Mill assumed, refused, in that moment, to perform an understanding she did not have. That refusal is available to anyone. AI makes it urgent for everyone.

Machines can already do what we'd mistaken for thinking. The question is whether we'll recover what we'd forgotten we'd lost, not thinking in the abstract, but thinking that builds. The philosopher-builder doesn't just understand the world. She changes it, and lets the change test her understanding. We can keep producing answer machines. It's easier, safer. But AI has made the cost visible. Every polished essay that arrives without a trace of struggle feels like an epitaph: Did anyone ever think here?

In a few hours I'll fly home, loosening the tie somewhere over the Atlantic. The costume never quite fits. But the work underneath it – the hours in the seminar room, watching someone's face as a question changes shape – that's real. That's what universities were meant to protect. Through the window, I can see the chapel spire, the library that's stood for centuries. The structures remain. The question is whether the thinking will. FT

Brendan McCord is founder and chair of Cosmos Institute

THE LAST HUMANITARIANS

ON THE ROAD TO KHARTOUM WITH THE UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES. BY HENRY MANCE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SALIH BASHEER

Only a few of the world's capital cities do not have a functioning airport. For nearly three years, Khartoum in Sudan has been one of them. The last time the runway was scheduled to reopen, in October 2025, it was hit by a drone strike the day before.

So we drive. Past gold mines and watermelon fields; past minarets and pyramids and mounds of building supplies; past billboards advertising bottled water and military strongmen. We drive along a two-lane highway that is often narrower than the carpet of waste plastic on either side. Litter is the landscape of a failed state. We pass through checkpoints – some run by teenagers with guns, just about recognisable as the army; others by people described only as volunteers. The road from Port Sudan on the Red Sea to Khartoum is more than 800km long. If you're lucky – or if you worry more about oncoming darkness than speeding accidents – you may make it before nightfall.

When we arrive in the city, there are no traffic jams, no chorus of beeps. The gridlock has gone. So has four-fifths of the population. Even if we weren't in a convoy of white UN SUVs, we could speed along the banks of the Nile with surreal ease. Until last March, Khartoum was the front line in a brutal civil war. Bullet holes riddle the buildings like flies on a rotting carcass. The city's few skyscrapers are wrecked, among them the Corinthia Hotel, built with Libyan money and nicknamed Gaddafi's Egg. Sudan has been at war for much of the seven decades since independence, but never before has the conflict come to the capital.

I came to Sudan with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, on his final trip in the role in December. As a young field officer, Grandi was present when the agency opened a headquarters in Khartoum. Now, more than three decades later, he found himself paying his respects to it. The office's prefab blocks had been burnt to the ground. Its metal roofs lay twisted and charred. "I've seen many of our offices damaged across the world, but I've never seen this," said Grandi. "Never in Kabul or in Syria." He did not comment on the human leg bone lying a few metres away.

Global humanitarianism is in crisis. The movement that grew up after the Holocaust, drew strength from the cold war, and fed off the international outrage at the genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda in the 1990s is bewildered and besieged. Wealthy governments – and their publics – have tired of paying for development aid and emergency assistance. They have tired even more of taking in refugees from the world's war zones and failed states. In his first term as US president, Donald Trump denied having referred to unwanted migrants as coming from "shithole countries". In his second, he boasted of doing so. This month, he has ordered the US to withdraw from 31 UN bodies, including the UN Democracy Fund and the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict.

UNHCR, the UN's refugee agency, escaped the cull. But the agency's funding fell by one-quarter last year, due to Trump's cuts to the state department. In 2025, for the first time in its 75-year history, UNHCR raised less than half of the funds it deemed necessary for its mission. Nearly 5,000 staff were made redundant. UN humanitarian agencies must "adapt, shrink or die", the state department said this month.

Meanwhile, the need is growing. States are failing, war is returning. Deaths in armed conflicts reached an 18-year high in 2022, according to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program. The number of people displaced nearly doubled over the past decade to 118 million. Three countries account for most of the rise: Ukraine, Venezuela and Sudan.

Sudan is the world's worst humanitarian crisis. The US has described the ethnically targeted massacres that have taken place as genocide. Nearly one-third of the population – 15 million people – have left their homes. More than two million have fled to Chad and Egypt. A few thousand have found their way on small boats across the English Channel to the UK, where 99 per cent have their asylum claims accepted. But the vast majority remain in Sudan. Amazingly, refugees have also been arriving in Sudan, fleeing violence in neighbouring South Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Yet, starved of resources, UNHCR had decided to cut more than half of its staff in Sudan. "You know those games where an extra level of difficulty is added and you have to find a solution? It's exactly like that," Grandi explained.

So now, a few days from retirement, Grandi had come to Sudan to visit a camp for displaced people and negotiate with the government. Grey-haired and in his late sixties, Grandi stood tall and tidy in the ruined office courtyard, where UN staff once ate at the café, and filmed videos thanking a couple of major UNHCR donors. "Thank you, Mr Yanai," he said in one message for the founder of Japanese clothing retailer Uniqlo. He filmed a US media interview, remembering to insert thanks to Trump, the man who had slashed his budget. Even in the late morning sun, he chose to wear a jacket: "It contains you."

Why had UNHCR's building been torched? One theory: the staff kept dollars in the office out of distrust of local banks, so the paramilitaries, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), looted the building then burnt it down to cover their tracks. But the discovery of the leg bone and a human skull raised a grimmer possibility. Perhaps, during the fight for Khartoum, the RSF kept and killed prisoners here.

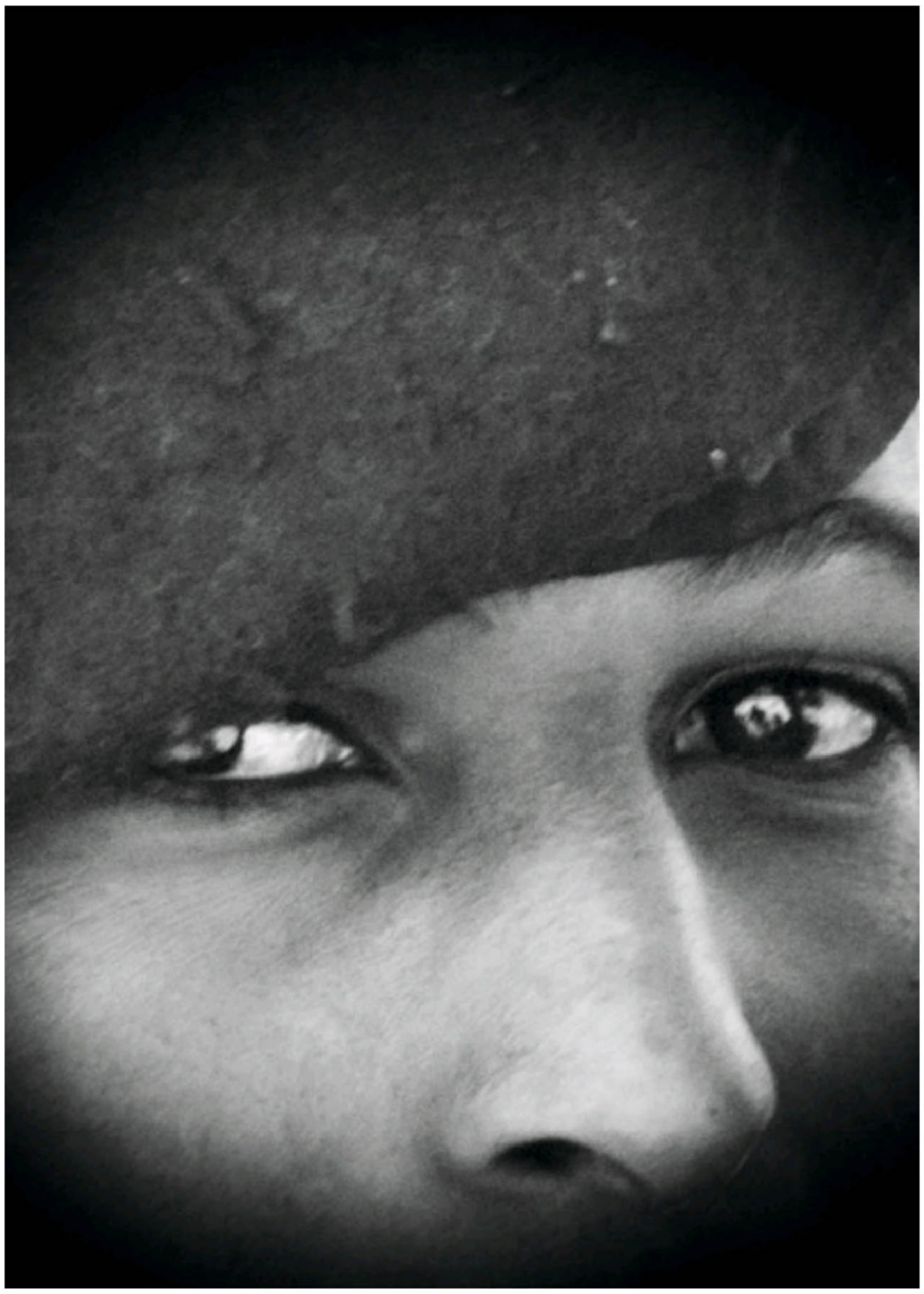
The greater mysteries were about the future. What could the UN achieve in a bloody civil war that most of the world was happy to ignore? Should it rebuild its office, or would the paramilitaries soon be back? And what could be salvaged of the world's humanitarian system? Perhaps the dreams had always been too big.

HUMANITARIANISM NEVER HAD A GOLDEN AGE, BUT EVEN SO it was not braced for the current disregard. Grandi had seen the darkest moments in Rwanda and Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo. "When I was in Goma in 1994, people briefly cared. We got so much aid we didn't know what to do with it." He drew a line from rich countries' hoarding of Covid-19 vaccines to their subsequent cutting of aid budgets. "I think Covid unmasked the selfishness of the global north."

In five days on the road with Grandi, I don't hear anyone refer to him by his name. To even his

RAPID SUPPORT FORCES SOLDIER KHARTOUM, SUDAN, APRIL 13 2019

PREVIOUS PAGE: CAMP FOR INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS, GEDAREF, SUDAN, MARCH 4 2025



‘ASYLUM IS AMONG THE FINEST GESTURES THAT HUMANITY HAS TO OFFER’
FILIPPO GRANDI

closest colleagues, he is the high commissioner, the HC. There is a point to this deference. Grandi’s job is to convince politicians to fulfil their legal obligations. Moral authority is his best weapon. “It can be leveraged more than you might think. Most of the time they ignore us but…”

He describes his role as that of a diplomat, a negotiator and a leader. What he most reminds me of is a priest. He has a soft, patient, devout manner. He grew up in a middle-class, Catholic family in Milan, the son of an architect. Faced with a year of military service in 1981, he instead chose conscientious objection: 18 months working at Amnesty International. In 1984, he went to work in Thailand with Cambodian refugees. A doctor, sensing his innocence, took him to watch a child dying of malaria. “It was a shock, but it also said, well, this idealism is not wrong – it’s still needed.”

Humanitarianism, Grandi quickly learnt, was always political. In the 1950s, the US did not resent refugees; it actively encouraged people to leave the Soviet bloc as a means of discrediting communism. Grandi found there was plenty of funding for Cambodian refugees because the US, since Nixon, had drawn closer to China and therefore its allies, the Khmer Rouge.

He was appointed high commissioner in 2015, beating rivals such as former Danish prime minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt. Like nearly all his predecessors, he was a European, but he was the first to have spent his entire career in the UN – a life-long humanitarian. He had served in Zaire, seeking to protect civilians from Rwanda-backed forces. In Afghanistan, he had worked to organise the first elections after the US-led invasion. He ran UNRWA, the agency in charge of assisting Palestinians displaced by the creation of Israel. Grandi’s staff appreciated that he knew the frustrations of obstructive governments. His influence could be doubted; his empathy could not.

In Sudan’s war, too, aid is entangled with politics. In 2019, the dictator Omar al-Bashir was overthrown when the military refused to follow his order to shoot at student demonstrators. But the youthful revolution soon fizzled. “We were idiots, to think you could undo 30 years in one go,” one revolutionary lamented.

Power was sucked up by two generals, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan of the Sudanese army and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemeti, of the paramilitary RSF. The two men fell out in 2023. In the ensuing fighting, the military retained control of Port Sudan and eventually regained Khartoum. The RSF dominated the west and south of the country.

In late October, 2025, the paramilitaries took the city of El Fasher, once home to 1.5 million people, meaning they controlled nearly all of the Darfur region of western Sudan. Survivors reported that RSF gunmen had gone door-to-door, executing men and raping women. Thousands of people were killed in a few days. The war’s total death toll is likely to be in the hundreds of thousands.

The UN was bringing hundreds of millions of dollars a year in aid to Sudan. But it wasn’t exactly welcome. The RSF wouldn’t let aid into El Fasher more than a month after taking the city. Grandi was briefed on one possible explanation: the happenings were so bloody that they required more than six weeks to clear up. Mobile phone networks in Darfur were cut off, but satellite images showed what appeared to be piles of bodies being burned. The Sudanese government also at times resisted aid being delivered to any area controlled by the paramilitaries, hoping to weaken the enemy. "This is so typical of civil wars. We had so much the same with Assad and Idlib," said Grandi.

Sudanese officials were hindering access to those fleeing the RSF's atrocities. Was this just the paranoia of an authoritarian state or something more? In 2009, the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Bashir for alleged war crimes in Darfur. The former president has never been extradited and was last reported to be living in a military hospital north of Khartoum. But the potential for similar charges was unlikely to be forgotten by his successors. It's not just what humanitarians will bring, it's what they might see.

For aid workers like Grandi, to deal with governments is often to implicate oneself in tragedy. In the recent Gaza war, Palestinians could not flee the territory to safety, partly because Egypt had refused to open its border. Grandi could have pressured the Egyptians to change course. But he agreed with them that opening the border would have been to abet the ethnic cleansing of the territory in the long term: "This [would have been] worse than Bosnia: this was cleansing the whole Palestinian population… I never asked for the border to be opened."

Grandi seemed at ease with these decisions. But he knew that in Sudan UNHCR greatly depended on the goodwill of the armed forces – themselves accused of using chemical weapons and bombing civilians.

WHEN THE HIGH COMMISSIONER VISITS A REFUGEE CAMP, HIS MEDIA team goes ahead first to select displaced people that he can talk to. The Al Afadh camp, north of Khartoum, houses the poorest of the poor – about 10,000 people who have fled atrocities committed in El Fasher. The journey of hundreds of miles has taken them days or even weeks. Thanks to extortion, it has often cost them most of their earthly possessions.

We, in contrast, glide up inside our air-conditioned SUVs. A refugee camp is an uncomfortably familiar place. I recognise the sand, the tents and the crowds from TV reports and charity appeals. I notice a boy with a T-shirt reading: "Believe in yourself. Nothing is impossible."

The absences take longer to come into focus. Families sit on mats in the sun. They have no shade. There are no more tents available. Each day, they have been told that more tents are coming. Each day afterwards, they have been disappointed. We have been told that the camp has few men. I find myself sitting in a group of widows. Their husbands and sons were stopped as they left El Fasher. Some were shot dead. Tens of thousands of civilians are missing; some are described as being in RSF detention. Most of them are probably dead.

A common allegation is that the RSF call men's families to demand ransoms. One woman says they demanded money to release her uncle. Once she had paid, they sent a video of him being killed. Another, Amal, pushes forward to show me her broken wrist. She used to sell vegetables and perfumes in the market at El Fasher; her husband was a day labourer. When their family

I FIND MYSELF SITTING IN A GROUP OF WIDOWS. THEIR HUSBANDS AND SONS WERE STOPPED AS THEY LEFT EL FASHER. TENS OF THOUSANDS ARE MISSING. MOST ARE PROBABLY DEAD

ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHY

Salih Basheer's photobook *The Return* documents the devastation of the war in Sudan, focusing on experiences of loss and displacement. Born in Sudan, now living in exile, Salih presents the challenges his people are facing, both inside Sudan and in neighbouring countries where many have sought refuge. The project juxtaposes his own photographic and collage works with texts in the form of diaries, conversations and testimonials. In the preface, Salih writes: "I find myself holding back from reaching out to my family. They are still in Khartoum since the conflict started. I think I'm trying to avoid hearing bad news. They're surviving and have adapted to the new reality, sadly."

……

The Return *is self published and available at www.salihbasheer.com/the-return-book*

KHARTOUM HAS BEEN EMPTIED OF ITS RESIDENTS SINCE THE OUTBREAK OF WAR IN APRIL 2023. MOST OF ITS RESIDENTS HAVE BEEN DISPLACED TO SAFE CITIES IN THE NORTH AND EAST OR OUTSIDE SUDAN. NAIROBI, KENYA, OCTOBER 25 2024

Missing
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escaped the city, the RSF tried to rape her two daughters. "My daughters said please save your lives and let them come to us." She and her husband resisted. He was shot dead; she was beaten. Their house was destroyed. Two of their sons are dead. She describes how she struggles to get out of bed each day. "I was a big woman, now my health is not like before."

Eventually, a UNHCR staff member leads me away. "If you want to hear their stories, you will be here seven days." Grandi is keen to talk, but the authorities want to control the narrative. Two officials insist on accompanying him to the tents. Their translated exchange becomes heated. Why does he have to go to this tent, the officials ask. I'm the high commissioner, he replies. The authority of his office begins to wilt in the heat.

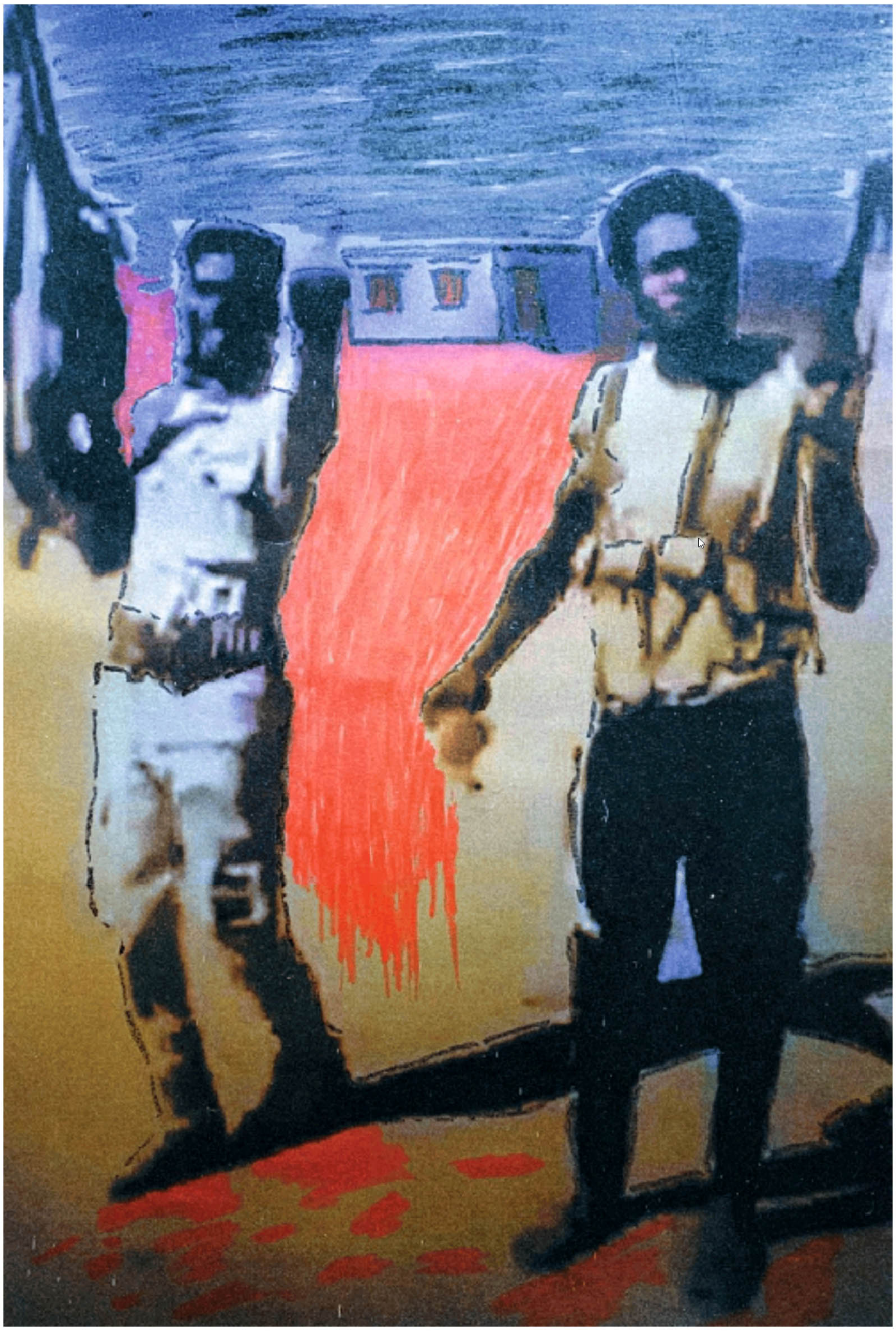
The stand-off ends in a messy compromise. Grandi ends up in a tent, accompanied by officials, meeting a woman who left El Fasher when eight months pregnant and who now has a 10-day old baby. The UN SUVs outside keep their engines running. Nearby, a cheerful 23-year-old woman is sitting on a mat, trying to follow an online lecture on her phone. Being displaced will not stop her from studying to be a nutritionist.

The trip upsets Grandi in a way that he welcomes. For his work, "anger is a necessary tool, a necessary element". Until a few years ago, he felt his indignation was shared. "Nobody would dream to justify any of these abuses. Now, condemnation of the Russians destroying schools, or the RSF doing what we heard, or whatever, is 'Yeah, maybe, but...' There's a lot of 'but'."

Humanitarians see camps as only a temporary fix, a last resort. This one may be a safe haven, but it already contains the seeds of its own failure. It is 20km from the nearest town. If the displaced people want to work, or see a doctor, they have problems. UNHCR officials admit that there are not enough toilets. They would have brought international experts to design the layout of the camp, but money was short. Grandi assures a family he's heard more tents will arrive the next day. When I check a few days later, the tents are still in transit. The reason is not clear.

Our convoy travels on, overtaking people on donkeys. Grandi meets with Sudanese politicians. He tells them the war has to stop, that his teams must have access. He is greeted with ceremony and, sometimes, gifts, although it is unclear whether his message is heeded. Officials try to stop him meeting refugees who have returned to Sudan from Egypt, citing dubious safety concerns. Such obstruction is "very rare" he says. "Tell them, I'm not afraid." The meeting goes ahead. Grandi tells the returnees they are home. "Don't be lazy. You have to find your way yourself." He worries that aid and refugee camps in particular create dependency. Later, in the SUV, he reflects that these people had only been refugees for a short while: "They are not corrupted yet."

Grandi has a fever, but his schedule is inflexible. He finds himself under a palm tree in a dark suit in 30C heat, listening to stories of South Sudanese refugees, stifling the occasional yawn. At the end, he rises to tell the refugees that money is sparse. He tells them not to join the war: "Unfortunately these things happen in every war. Please tell your people not to do these things." The message is calibrated to win favour with the government officials watching.



TWO RAPID SUPPORT FORCES SOLDIERS CELEBRATE THE BURNING OF A HOUSE. THE IMAGE IS A COLLAGE OF SCREENSHOTS OF VIDEOS POSTED ON SOCIAL MEDIA BY THE RSF

© SALIH BASHEER / MAGNUM PHOTOS

AMAL'S HUSBAND RESISTED. HE WAS SHOT DEAD; SHE WAS BEATEN. THEIR HOUSE DESTROYED. TWO OF THEIR SONS ARE DEAD

These were the knots Grandi tried to unpick in his visits and in his calls. The Gulf states can in theory compensate for some of the west's aid cuts. But their funding, said Grandi, "is erratic, it is unpredictable, and it is very often very politicised, very driven by specific purposes". Gulf countries wanted to determine what their money was spent on. UNHCR wanted the flexibility to respond to emergencies and forgotten crises. It saw that as key to its impartiality. "Do the Gulf countries want to support multilateralism or not? Or do they want a more bilateral system? China has opted for bilateral."

The United Arab Emirates claims to be the "second largest donor" to the UN in Sudan (a claim that UN data doesn't seem to support), but it is also widely documented to have armed the RSF paramilitaries. At a UN donor meeting in December, representatives from the UAE and Sudan engaged in a shouting match: the Sudanese furious at the Emiratis' cheek in posing as humanitarians, the UAE denying wrongdoing and saying the Sudanese made aid impossible. The compromise: the UAE donated $15mn to UNHCR, mostly to be spent on Sudanese refugees outside Sudan. The UAE also agreed to pay $550mn into a global humanitarian fund. The UN would maintain control of how it was spent. Sudan's government, in effect, had to accept.

Humanitarians' eternal dilemma is when to condemn abuses and when to stay silent in order to protect access to the needy. The Red Cross does not take sides; the UN is more nuanced. Hearing of the RSF's atrocities from survivors of El Fasher had, in a grim way, made Grandi's job easier: he could now go "full steam" in condemning them. But there was also a new risk: as the RSF advanced, civilians in other towns might flee faster. Then UNHCR's lack of tents – its lack of capacity – would be further exposed.

Three weeks earlier, I'd watched Grandi deliver a speech on global solidarity at Westminster Abbey on the same day the UK Home Office announced a set of restrictive immigration measures. The most eye-catching of these was a plan (later disavowed) to seize asylum-seekers' jewellery to help pay the costs of their accommodation. In front of a supportive audience, Grandi declined to pick a fight. But he insisted the principles of the Refugee Convention were "as valid today as they were in 1951". "Do we want to go back to 1939?" he mused. "Asylum is among the finest gestures that humanity has to offer."

The 1951 Refugee Convention, the international agreement by which countries agree to protect those fleeing persecution, is the UNHCR's revered text. But it is not the document some might imagine. Originally, it did not create a global right of asylum, applying only to those displaced by events in Europe before 1951. Only later, in 1967, did a protocol extend its protections to the whole world. Even then, while the convention offered protection from targeted, Nazi-style "persecution", the reality in many poor countries was more likely to be war and state failure. But if its principles have, in practice, often been double standards, now they are openly questioned by some western governments.

THE TRIP UPSETS GRANDI IN A WAY THAT HE WELCOMES. 'ANGER IS A NECESSARY TOOL'

The convention's scope has been widened gradually by regional agreements and by lawyers. It doesn't insist that refugees claim asylum in the first safe country that they reach. This has created a problem. Hundreds of millions of people live in fragile states. Their potential to travel has been aided by modern transport, mobile phones and smuggling gangs. Is the west obliged to accept them all? Is it not reasonable to seek limits?

Alexander Betts and Paul Collier, academics at Oxford university, have argued that the system is inadequate. Compassion must be clever, they argue. The right to asylum is not a right to move wherever you want. Refugees can be best assisted in the region they come from, where they are likely to find it easier to work and easier to return home. At the moment, the west pays billions to process claims and house the minority of asylum-seekers who make their way to its borders. One solution could be a grand bargain, wherein rich countries offer more aid and trade opportunities to troubled regions in return for taking fewer refugees themselves, and being able to return humanely those not recognised as refugees.

Grandi was sceptical about wholesale reform. In any case, he felt Europe could cope. About 41,500 people crossed the English Channel in small boats in 2025. "In one day, you can have 40,000 people [from Sudan] go to Chad. I think we have gone out of proportion with this polemic that is fuelled by the populists." The west has taken millions of refugees from Ukraine, "without a leaf trembling, as we say in Italian". The line wasn't entirely convincing. The example of Ukraine is also an argument that solidarity works best when it is regional: European publics had accepted moral duties to Ukrainians that they would not to Syrians or Sudanese.

Didn't Grandi fear that, unreformed, the convention will let the populists win? "Even if that were a risk, I would not be prepared to address it by eliminating the convention." Migration is "the price you pay for being rich".

IN MID-NOVEMBER, TRUMP POSTED THAT, AT THE REQUEST OF SAUDI Arabia, he would seek to bring stability to Sudan, "the most violent place on Earth [but] a Great Civilization and Culture". Here was something Grandi could cling to. "Of course, then you have his own vanity, you have the minerals, whatever, [but] peace is never a pure exercise, there's always something around." The hope was probably in vain: Denise Brown, the UN's co-ordinator in Sudan, reflected that there was "no solution in sight".

In the days that Grandi was in Sudan, Trump's White House published a National Security Strategy that didn't even mention the UN. The president had announced a peace deal in the DR Congo, where the UN was again almost invisible. He later unveiled a Board of Peace for Gaza, which he said "might" replace the UN.

Barham Salih, a former president of Iraq and himself twice a refugee, had been named as Grandi's successor. Salih's pitch was that the high commissioner should come from the region with the greatest refugee crises. His appointment reflected, perhaps, that Europe's claim to humanitarian leadership was fading – a politician would be needed to lead UNHCR out of its predicament.

Some aid experts saw Grandi's tenure as a missed opportunity to process the lessons of the 2015-16 Syrian refugee crisis, and to adjust UNHCR to a new era of western retreat. The reliance on US funding was unsustainable. "We're not going to go back," said Sara Pantuliano, chief executive of the Overseas Development Institute, a think-tank. Grandi is "a person of incredible integrity. But I don't think I can say he's done enough to make the organisation fit for the challenges of today." One option has been a merger with the International Organization for Migration, a UN body historically more under the sway of the US. Another, to delegate more to local groups that can deliver aid more efficiently.

Decades of foreign postings consumed Grandi, who is single with no kids. "You have to make sacrifices. I don't even like that word. You have to make choices." I wondered if he now questioned his own choices. Afghanistan was back under Taliban rule; Gaza was in ruins. He chose to remember the good parts. When the Taliban fell, Afghan women employed by the UN returned to work. "I remember the lady who later became my secretary entering the office, taking this burka, literally tearing it away and throwing it to the other side of the room. I still have goosebumps. That was the spirit. And you were not imposing: they wanted that.

"I think it was Bush Jr who said the US will never do state-building again. What a strategic error!" The lack of a state capacity was "the root of all these problems that we see here". His own lesson from Afghanistan was not that the west shouldn't try but that the west shouldn't waste an opportunity. "I think the international community is wasting the opportunity in Syria at the moment: too slow, too hesitant, too hand-wringing about 'Shall we help them or not?'... You have to take some risks."

In the final days of Grandi's term, the US announced $2bn in humanitarian funding for the UN: a fraction of what it used to give, but still better than nothing. "They don't want to be seen as non-humanitarian." He had learnt long ago that to care is to compromise; often it is to clutch at whatever remains.

Henry Mance is the FT's chief features writer

The gold standard in later living

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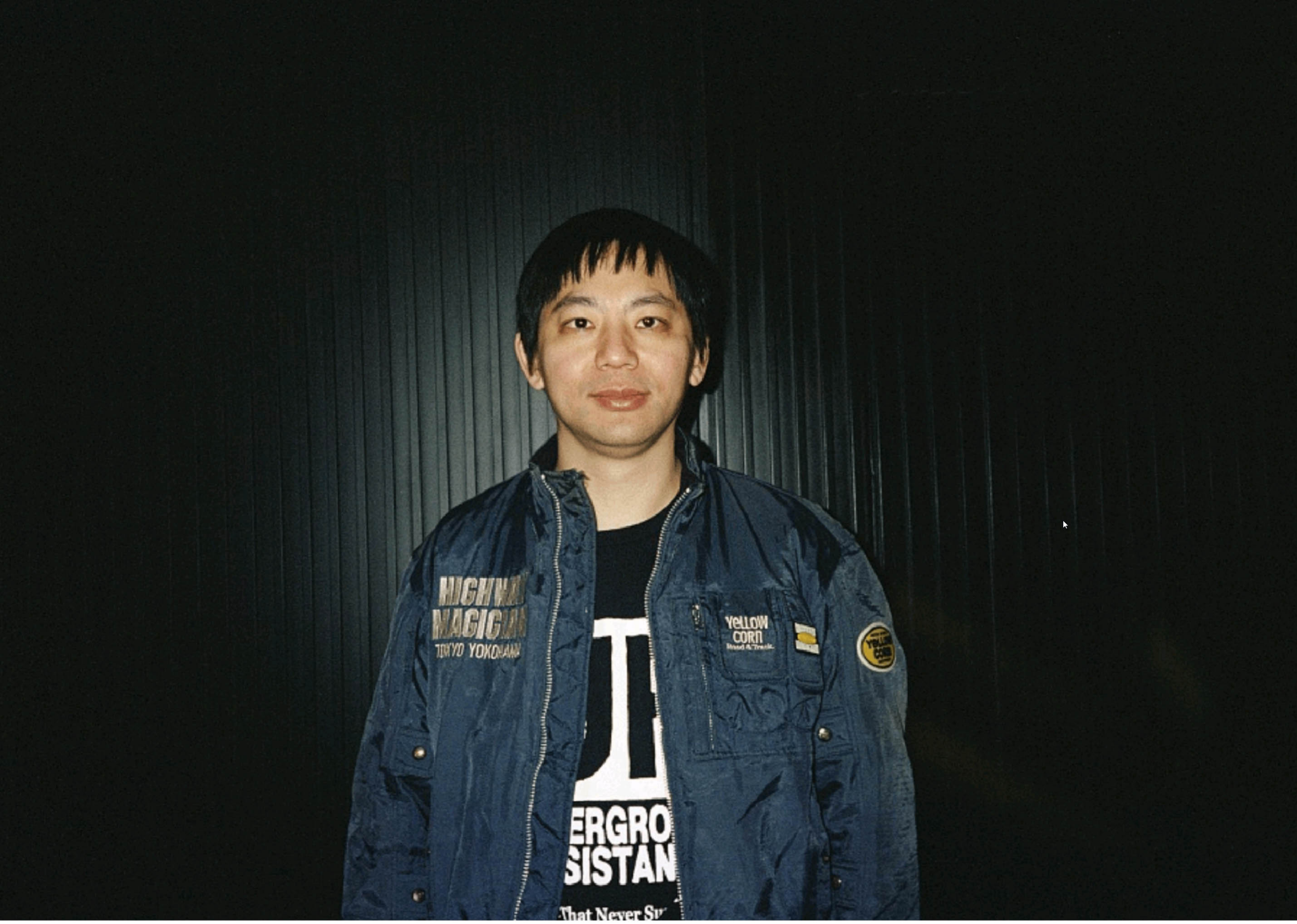
NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

SHANGHAI'S TECHNO SCENE ATTRACTED A GLOBAL CROWD – UNTIL THE CITY WAS HIT BY CULTURAL CRACKDOWNS AND COVID. BUT ONE PIONEER STAYED BEHIND HIS DECKS

BY EDWARD WHITE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHUWEI LIU



FROM LEFT: FROM 'SHADOWS RETURNED', PHOTOGRAPHS MADE AT THE SHELTER IN 2016; MA HAIPING IN SHANGHAI

IT IS A STEAMY SUMMER NIGHT IN SHANGHAI, the kind when baked apartment water pipes cannot deliver cold showers and when, stepping outside, your eyes fog and sting with the heat.

Ma Haiping, undisputed king of the Shanghai techno scene, has the right idea. He is perched outside a dive bar in the city's tree-lined former French Concession, with a frosty bottle of Corona beer in front of him and luxurious cool air conditioning streaming from an open window behind. It's about 11pm, an hour before he is due to play his set, and every few minutes Ma pats at his shorts pocket and turns to catch sight of his backpack, making sure his chunky USB drives, loaded with tunes for the night, have not somehow vanished.

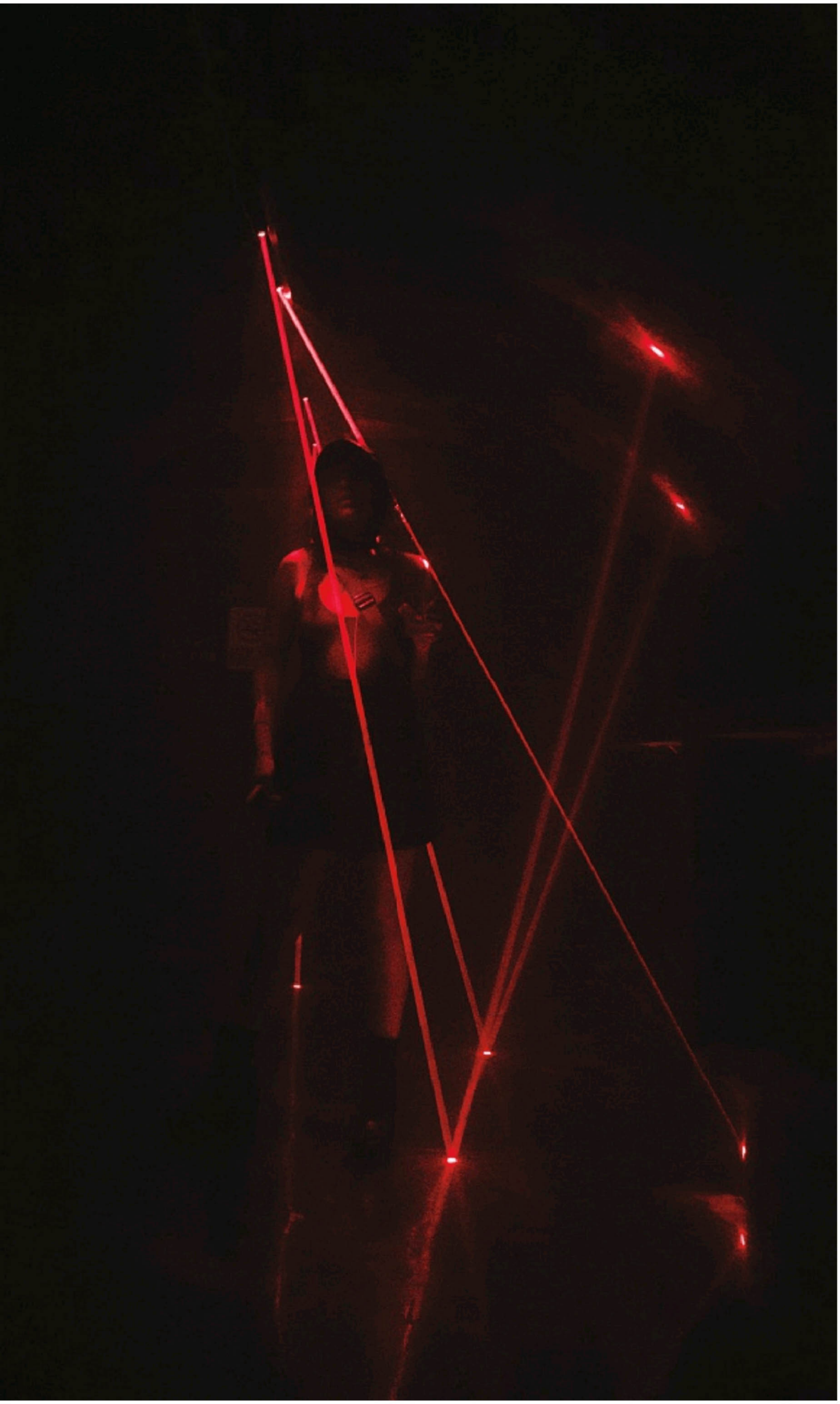
The youthful-looking 44-year-old's music has won awards and garnered international acclaim, yet, increasingly, he sees himself as belonging to a Shanghai that no longer exists. The city he started out in was synonymous with China's rapid development and opening up to the world. It allowed Ma and others to become part of a thriving music scene that represented both resistance to the old China and the freedom of the new. Today, the great opening is a distant memory. Hit by years of economic malaise and the psychological scarring of the Covid-19 pandemic, Shanghai is a very different place. Among the collateral damage is the underground music scene Ma helped build.

His desire to keep its culture alive burns as strongly as ever. And, as we talk, a trickle of young people, mostly Chinese, though there are a few foreigners, mooch around on the pavement before scanning their phones and heading into the club below. Their style is a collage of fishnet stockings, studded belts, Dr Martens platform boots and purple hoods with wolf ears. One figure stands out: a woman wearing a full-length black gown, thick-framed sunglasses wrapped around her closely shaved head.

Close to midnight, Ma follows them down a narrow corridor with concrete walls, corrugated metal and hanging chains. Beneath the red neon signage of the club's name, Abyss, an industrial door opens to a staircase where a wall of bass booms and pulses, and a thick, almost dusty seam of cold air, mixed with plumes of smoke from cigarettes and vapes, billows up. In the cavernous room below, designed as a venue for live S&M-themed raves, Ma sets up on the mixing decks behind a sheet of mesh cage to play his trademark techno: pounding, hypnotic beats laced with futuristic and soulful soundscapes.

Dancers in Shanghai need to be taken for a ride, he tells me. They want ups and downs. And they like breaks – periods where the melody drops out and there is just the suspense of a clicking bass drum before different elements are brought in and finally the tune picks up again. It is different from playing techno in the underground clubs of Berlin and Amsterdam, he says, where dancers – "drug people" – crave constancy. They can't handle things being too slow, or too drawn out. Here, Ma says, the dance floor is still a bit shy. "You need to tell them, 'One, two, three, you need to dance'... Chinese people like it, the da-da, da-da-da-da-da-boom."

Few are better at this than Ma. Over the next hour and a half, he displays a frenetic energy behind the decks. He shifts and bounces from foot



to foot, his hands constantly moving between dials and buttons on his mixing desk as he adjusts the myriad elements of songs while bringing in new beats and fading out old ones. Amid the flux, his head stays steady, his face a study in concentration. The set list has been meticulously planned, from an elemental opening track, "Aire Silencioso" by Madrid's techno veteran Oscar Mulero, through to Ma's own futuristic groove, "Artificial Ecstatic". Throughout, his gaze shifts - from the equipment, to the crowd, and back - as he takes them on a journey.

Born in 1981, Ma grew up in a Shanghai that was in the vanguard of the changing times overseen by reformist leader Deng Xiaoping. His parents worked in the new wave of factories that were transforming China into a manufacturing powerhouse, but Ma found music early on. His father would sit outside their apartment playing an *erhu*, a two-string bow played vertically, or a bamboo flute, reciting tunes from popular Hong Kong-Chinese films like *The Shaolin Temple* for the neighbours.

By the 1990s, commercially importing foreign music into China was still banned but radio stations had started to rebroadcast American programmes. Ma and his friends listened attentively, tracking down songs they liked through the *dakou* trade, in which shiploads of cassettes and CDs sent from the US and Japan ended up as scrap on the Chinese black market. In just a few years, they traversed decades of previously unavailable western popular music, from Elvis and The Beatles to Michael Jackson and Metallica. They heard Nirvana before Kurt Cobain's death in 1994. In high school, their tastes expanded further, as they listened to electronic icons including Kraftwerk and Aphex Twin, alongside alternative rock groups like Sonic Youth and The Jesus and Mary Chain.

Ma's mother was unconvinced the pastime could lead anywhere. At home, he says, there were two recurring questions: "Have you eaten? Have you thought about how to make some money?" At school there was little focus on music, art or culture. But when he arrived at university to study fine art, Ma encountered a generation of teachers who sensed a historic window for freedom of expression. Many were accomplished artists who bore the scars of Mao's cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. They imbued in their students a sense that there was a way, through the arts, to resist whatever pressures might come their way. They urged them to experiment.

For Ma, that something was techno, electronic music which originated in Detroit in the 1980s. His discovery of the genre coincided with the sudden availability of relatively cheap electronics. Ma and his friends were self-confessed nerds, and making music on a computer, rather than as part of a conventional band, was attractive. But there was no guidebook, no teacher. Nor did they know much about synthesisers, an instrument which, along with a drum machine, is fundamental to most electronic music. The first songs they created were painstakingly stitched together: a patchwork of second-long samples of a drum, guitar or other instrument captured from a *dakou* CD. They called the process *tu fa lian gang* - a phrase derived from Mao-era steel-making in backyard furnaces.

Ma was fastidious in his study of techno. When a DJ came from out of town he made sure he could perch somewhere behind the booth, noting down the track titles and artist names of each song played. He systematically devoured records, listening to releases from prominent labels by catalogue number. He began to understand techno not as a narrow branch of electronic music but as a culture in itself. Fascinated by its deep roots in industrial Detroit and the club scene of East Berlin, he was drawn to how it offered endless ways to portray emotion and access to the future.

As his teachers had suggested, music was an avenue for resistance. When Ma felt something around him was not right, this feeling could be expressed through his production. But it was also capable of delivering a deeper exorcism. As he listened, Ma felt the existence of another world beyond the socialist ideology that had been ingrained from his schooling. It took years for him even to understand the significant hold this had on his psyche - and years more to peel it all back. "I felt I could clean Mao out of my body," he said. "It's a little bit painful... the old ideas collapse."

In his twenties and thirties, an underground music scene in Shanghai began to take flight. Techno was among a panoply of subcultures drawing in more and more people. Ma and his friends raged against what they saw as mainstream electronic dance music. The parties they organised were named "Antidote".

In 2014, Ma quit his day job at a museum to focus solely on music. An increasing number of his tracks were released by American and European labels. Years earlier, when he had started to bring cash home from gigs and side hustles in commercial music production, his mother immediately stopped complaining about the noise coming out of the speakers in his bedroom.

For many of Ma's generation, it was difficult to see their lives in Shanghai as anything other than a linear progression of expanding cultural horizons and greater connectivity to the outside world. And yet, if they had considered the city's past dramatic swings in fortune, they might have guessed the good times would never last.

SHANGHAI'S FOREIGN CONCESSIONS WERE established in the 1840s, the spoils of opium wars that protected westerners' trade and kept them above local laws and local society. Their special status disappeared with the Japanese occupation in the early 1940s, followed by the Chinese Communist Party victory in the country's civil war. Today, the wrecking balls and bulldozers of development have destroyed swaths of old Shanghai, but large tracts of the city's inner west are still lined with the ubiquitous colonial-era plane trees. The area remains peppered with mansions, apartments and lane houses, many in the Art Deco-style popular during the golden era of the 1920s and 1930s.

UR
UNDERGROUND
RESISTANCE

LEFT: FROM 'SHADOWS RETURNED', 2016
RIGHT: LIU NAXIN DJING AT FRUITYSHOP RECORDS

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RIGHT: MA BROWSING AT FRUITYSHOP RECORDS

MA SEES MANY OF THE YOUNG GENERATION TRYING TO RESIST SOMETHING. BUT HE IS WORRIED THE MOMENT TO CHANGE, TO EXPERIMENT, WILL PASS THEM BY

At the start of Shanghai's Yongfu Lu – formerly Route Pere Huc after a French pastor – stands a grand brick building, built as a garden residence in the 1930s with an Art Nouveau-influenced interior staircase. Today, it is occupied by a local unit of China's commerce ministry, but for nearly 10 years a bomb shelter beneath the building was the beating heart of Shanghai's underground music scene.

By the early 2000s, the Blue Ice bar was struggling to make money. A couple of music enthusiasts, Gary Wang and a British friend of his from Manchester, Gaz Williams, took over operations in late 2007. They simplified the interior, renamed the venue The Shelter, and started to fulfil their ambition of bringing their favourite artists from overseas to Shanghai. There was no master plan or lofty vision. The acts that came reflected their personal tastes and included prominent American hip-hop producers DJ Premier and Cut Chemist. But The Shelter also served as a home base for locals to play. Ma's collective, Void, were among the resident DJs.

These were years when Shanghai's image as an international city seemed to ring true again. The number of foreign residents roughly tripled from the turn of the century to nearly 180,000 by 2015. In earlier times, the city's foreign aristocrats would be chauffeured from their segregated homes in the French, British and American Concessions to the 24-storey Park Hotel, where a retractable roof on the top floor would open and they danced beneath the stars. Now the visitors preferred to dance underground. But the city's label as the Paris of the East was making a comeback.

When Vice profiled The Shelter in 2013, Wang joked that so many people were opening underground clubs that some had closed before he knew their name. The magazine described Yongfu Lu as "lined with rooftop beer gardens, coke-dusted hookah lounges... and hustlers aggressively pushing their shitty hashish".

Longtime residents struggle to put their finger on exactly when Shanghai hit its peak. In 2009, the Void crew had organised what would be their biggest party, about 2,000 people packing out an industrial warehouse. But through the 2010s the pace of GDP growth had already started to slow down before the collapse of the debt-fuelled property boom in the early 2020s.

For many underground venues, astronomical rent increases over the years made business no longer viable. Savage competition between venues, including club owners bribing police to raid their rivals, didn't help. Even when club owners kept their venues free of drugs and fights, puritanical cultural ministry cadres could shut things down. Authorities concerned about the creep of loose morals and foreign influence were an acute problem for venues seen as friendly to the LGBT community, and locals' tolerance of drunk foreigners had run its course.

Socially, things had been tightening for a while. Xi Jinping came to power in late 2012 vowing to clean up the party's excesses. Campaigns emerged in waves, tackling graft and corruption at both the grassroots and senior levels and, increasingly, cracking down on perceived dissent in creative industries. Meanwhile, the state's surveillance apparatus was expanded across the city. The result for Shanghai was, over time, a clean-up of the city's grey economy, with many of the more colourful corners being eradicated, liberal voices slowly silenced. The Shelter held its last night on December 31 2016. Local officials had declined a request to renew the bar's licence and returned the space to its original purpose as a public emergency bunker.

The city's brutal Covid lockdown was the final straw for many. In what was still by far China's most liberal and international city, the sudden loss of all personal freedoms was compounded by horror stories; residents being forcibly taken to quarantine camps, mothers separated from their children and people attempting to take their own lives after months of isolation. The Shanghai government stopped reporting official data on the number of foreign residents after the pandemic. One local think-tank estimated an exodus of more than 125,000, leaving about 73,000 by 2023. Among them were Wang and Williams of The Shelter. No one knows how many Chinese left the city but the number included scores of creatives – writers, musicians, photographers, artists central to the underground scene's vibrancy – who decamped either to other Chinese cities or left the country.

After the pandemic's dark days, almost every venue that had once played underground music closed for good. The years of work by Ma and his friends to build a techno scene in Shanghai appeared, ultimately, to have been in vain.

A 10-minute walk from Yongfu is Fruityshop Records, a small record store on Changle Road. Inside, it is tidily packed with crates of vinyl popular among collectors, including records by the late American producer-composer J-Dilla and Japanese city-pop icon Tatsuro Yamashita. Above the shelves of records, speakers or record players, the shop's walls are lined with posters including vintage ads for 1970s Blaxploitation films such as *Foxy Brown*, *Coffy* and *Cotton Comes to Harlem*. Behind a set of turntables, with streaks of metallic green through her jet-black hair, is a woman in her early thirties named Liu Naxin.

Before the pandemic, Liu was content with her lot. Having grown up in Inner Mongolia, she had landed a job as a financial adviser in Beijing. In her late twenties, she had free time and money to spare. She travelled, went hiking and surfing and learnt to play tennis. Though she listened to pop songs, she felt no particular connection to music. But in lockdown, social activities and travel ground to a halt. Months later, in the final months before Beijing finally gave up on its pandemic controls, Liu found herself on the dance floor at a series of underground techno parties, struck by what seemed to be a sense of utopia. There were no divisions among the people. Everything felt essential. She felt free. Liu tumbled into the culture, following many parallel threads, not just European techno but also rock, jazz, film and literature. She started to learn how to produce techno herself via online tutorials.

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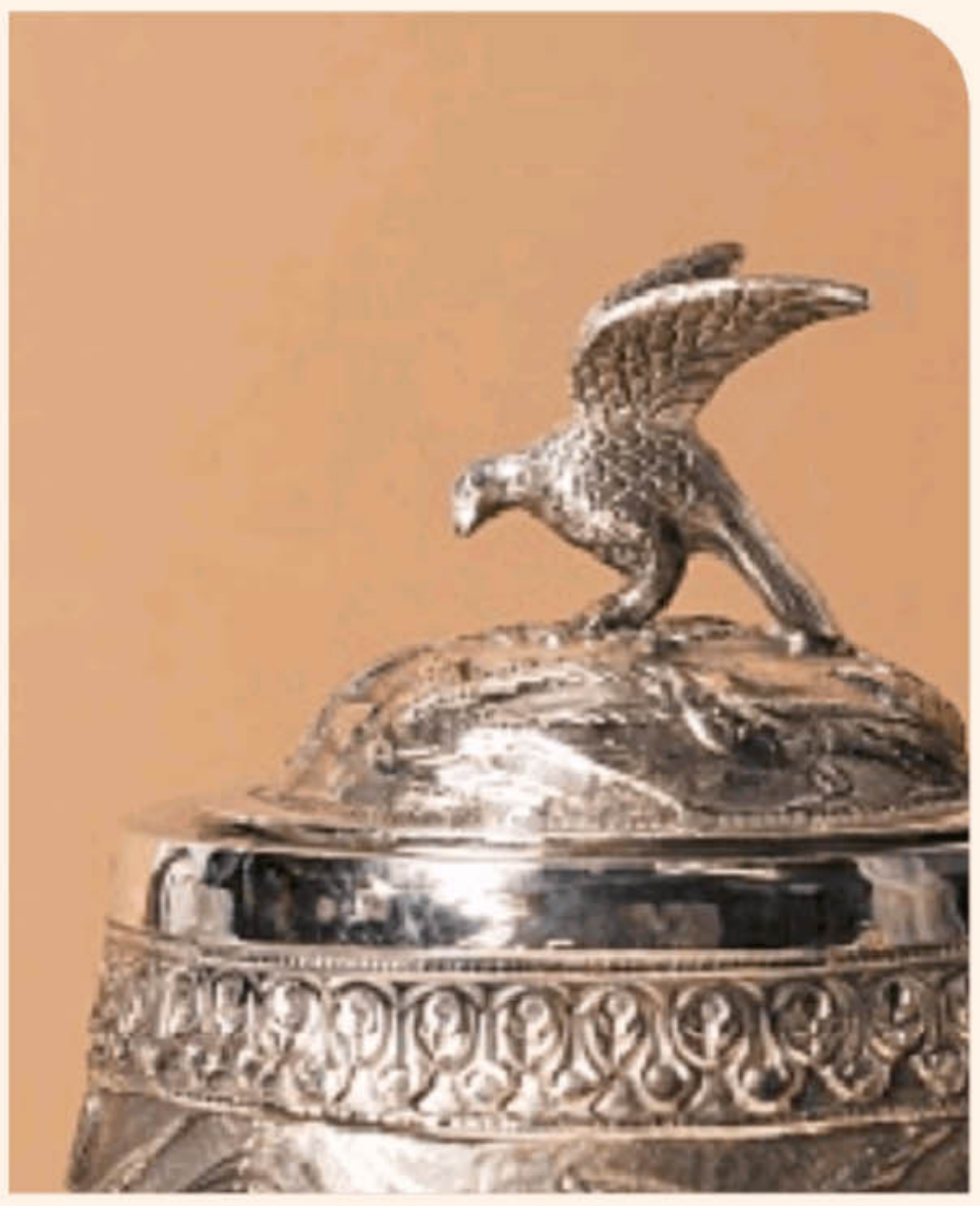
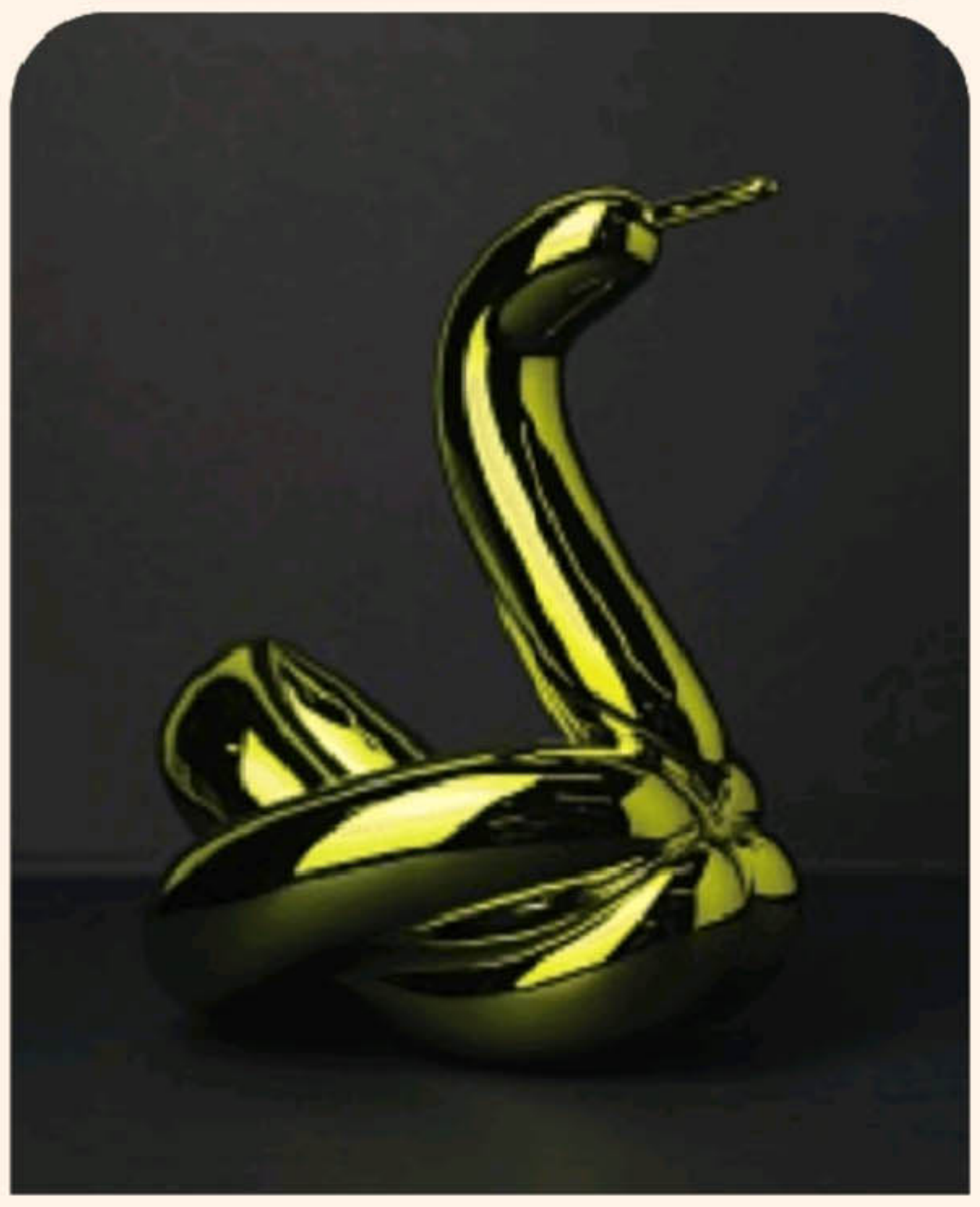
Saturday 31 January
at 13:00

Art of Nature
Tuesday 10 February
11:00
Barley Mow Centre
W4 4PH

Asian Art
Wednesday
11 February, 10:00
Barley Mow Centre
W4 4PH



Silver & Objects of Vertu
Wednesday
18 February, 11:00
Barley Mow Centre
W4 4PH



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RIGHT: FROM 'SHADOWS RETURNED', 2016

AFTER MONTHS OF LOCKDOWN, LIU FOUND HERSELF AT A SERIES OF UNDERGROUND TECHNO PARTIES, STRUCK BY A SENSE OF UTOPIA

For a few months, the idea took hold that she should go to Berlin, one of the spiritual homes of electronic music. She started studying German but soon realised that travelling to another country wasn't necessary. The life she was chasing was already there; it was just a matter of living with the culture and the music. Then she met Ma Haiping.

Ma conveyed to Liu his understanding of the core, almost spiritual ideas of techno culture: futurism, philosophy, science fiction, ways of seeing the world from a multidimensional perspective. The music, she discovered, was a projection of the future, allowing for deep mental exploration.

In 2023, she moved to Shanghai and found a job two days a week at the record store. Now she's organising her own parties, following the lead of Ma and the Void crew, inviting DJs from around China and overseas with their own original music to share. At her core, Liu says she is a producer. Most days, she wakes in her home studio and immediately works on new music.

Last September, two years after seeing techno played live for the first time, Liu, whose stage name is Naxin, played her first live gig. Stepping behind the decks at a small Shanghai club she tried not to show her nerves and concentrated on the response she was getting from the dance floor. This year she played to about 300 people. She has found a connection, between herself, the culture and the dance floor, no matter how many or few are in the crowd. "It's a really beautiful experience," she says.

Liu is now an important driver of a resurgence in the underground scene. Gigs are happening again most weeks. A couple of small clubs have opened their doors. The crowds are smaller than a decade ago – in their hundreds, not thousands – and distinctly more local than they once were. Liu, living a new life, hardly sees her old friends. But her mum, a government official, and her dad, a banker, come to her parties to scan tickets on the door and to hand out drinks vouchers.

MA LIVES ON SHANGHAI'S OUTSKIRTS, IN A bright one-bedroom studio apartment on the eighth floor of a nondescript cluster of apartment blocks.

At the entrance of his flat is a collection of labelled photos. It's something of a shrine to the golden years: performances at festivals in Shanghai and Melbourne; Ma with Chinese artist Cao Fei at the Guggenheim in New York, where her video was being exhibited (he created the soundtrack); Ma standing alongside his Void comrades and Robert Hood, one of the architects of modern techno, at a 2010 gig at The Shelter.

On the opposite wall is a photo of Ma with Jeff Mills. The 62-year-old godfather of techno is a figure of immense influence in the music industry. Encouraged by a DJ friend, in 2020 Ma emailed a few songs to Mills. To his astonishment, Mills replied swiftly, asking for more tracks. The result was the 2021 release by Mills' Axis Records of *Chang'e No. 4* – named after a Chinese moon landing a few years earlier. All of this, says Ma, was not even a dream, just a wish which came true.

Last October, he and his Void co-founder Cameron Wilson launched a new label. They hope to release music that captures the spirit of all the parties they have organised and tells the stories of their lives over the past 18 years, tales of how native and non-native cultures have blended together. The label's first release is Wilson's latest album, a journey through the boom years to the lockdown nightmare. When he plays live, he includes a sample of an infamous government spokesperson during the lockdown: "Control your soul's desire for freedom."

Outside Ma's window, Shanghai is finding its feet. Each weekend, domestic tourists in their thousands descend on the French Concession, taking selfies next to the remaining heritage buildings. Local government officials claim that Shanghai is greener, cleaner and, thanks to the overlay of surveillance, safer than it has ever been. They also tout investments and support for the so-called night economy. In 2023, a new $100mn, eight-storey restaurant and nightclub complex opened at Fuxing Park, in the former French Concession, which brings in as many as 10,000 people, mostly aged 18-35, on weekdays, and double that on Friday and Saturday nights.

Ma still has little time for the kind of mainstream electronic dance culture promoted by image-conscious DJs at the city's new superclubs. But he empathises with the younger generation in China who, he believes, are in a difficult position. He can see that many are trying to resist something, can feel something is not right in the world around them. But he is worried that the moment to change, to experiment, will pass them by.

"If we want to be free, don't be a normal person," he says. "The young kids want to be themselves, but they don't know how."

He hopes to at least be a positive influence, encouraging younger DJs like Naxin to see the creation of original music, not money, as the most important element of what they do. But there is so much at stake. Alongside abstract art, architecture and science fiction, music can be an important release valve in China, a society where political dissent is frequently met with harsh punishment.

The main room in his apartment is dominated by a huge leather chair in front of a wide desk with a large screen and a collection of instruments. Growing up, when Ma read about Beethoven and the thousands of hours he spent toiling away playing the piano and composing music, such dedication seemed shocking, beyond real. Now, as he sits each day for at least four or five hours trying to make new music, Ma feels he finally understands Beethoven's commitment.

Each year, he composes about 20 new tracks, and every time he performs he always has a new original song to try out on the dance floor. It seems unlikely that Shanghai will, in the foreseeable future, feel quite so open and free as it once did. Still, Ma is confident that China will always need the city to be a window to the world, which means there will be space for the underground for as long as there are people willing to head down that road. "It's a living culture," he says. "I'm proud that we are still going." FT

Edward White is the FT's China correspondent

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Appetites

Wine

A difficult year for Burgundy

by JANCIS ROBINSON

ILLUSTRATION by DEBORA SZPILMAN

Nightmare", "misery", "exhausting", "unremittingly grim", "desperate" – capped by "gruesome" final yields – those are some words that have been used to describe the 2024 burgundy growing season. For the UK merchants currently trying to sell the resulting wines, a very different narrative prevails: it's a "classic", "precise", "elegant" vintage, "defined by freshness, clarity and poise".

Burgundian vignerons have been worrying about the dangerously drier climate that seems to be heading their way for years, but in 2024 it was wet weather that proved the real hazard. They had almost enough rain for a decade's worth of growing seasons. During the crucial flowering period in late spring, heavy rainfall in both frost-hit Chablis and the main Côte d'Or region positively pummelled the little vine flowers that should have developed into grapes, with later-flowering Pinot Noirs particularly hard hit.

The rain, accompanied by unusually low temperatures, continued throughout June and July, encouraging rampant mildew that, unusually, had begun as early as the flowering

JANCIS RECOMMENDS

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From wines tasted chez Flint, Goedhuis Waddesdon, Justerini & Brooks, Liberty Wines and Robert Rolls, although I gave only a very meagre handful of scores above 17 out of 20.

- **Dom Bertrand Bachelet,** Maranges
- **Dom Aline Beauné,** Montagny
- **Dom Billaud-Simon,** Chablis
- **Dom Samuel Billaud,** Chablis
- **Jean-Claude Boisset,** Nuits-St-Georges
- **Dom Jean-Marc Burgaud,** Morgon
- **Dom des Chézeaux,** Gevrey-Chambertin
- **Dom Yvon Clerget,** Pommard
- **Dom du Clos des Rocs,** Loché
- **Marc Colin,** St-Aubin
- **Dom Philippe Colin,** Chassagne-Montrachet
- **Dom Comte Armand (reds),** Volnay
- **Dom Coquard Loison Fleurot,** Flagey-Echézeaux
- **Dom Jean-Paul Droin,** Chablis
- **Maison Joseph Drouhin,** Beaune
- **Dom Drouhin Laroze,** Gevrey-Chambertin
- **Dom Dubreuil-Fontaine,** Pernand-Vergelesses
- **Dom Duroché,** Gevrey-Chambertin
- **Jane Eyre,** Cissey
- **Dom Faiveley,** Nuits-St-Georges
- **Jean-Philippe Fichet,** Meursault
- **Justin Girardin,** Santenay
- **Dom Henri Gouges,** Nuits-St-Georges
- **Dom Patrick Javillier,** Meursault
- **Dom Lafouge,** Auxey-Duresses
- **Dom Lamy-Pillot,** Chassagne-Montrachet
- **Dom Laroche,** Chablis
- **Dom Lejeune,** Pommard
- **Benjamin Leroux,** Beaune
- **Dom de la Monette,** Mercurey
- **Alex Moreau,** Chassagne-Montrachet
- **Dom Thomas Morey,** Chassagne-Montrachet
- **Dom Michel Niellon,** Chassagne-Montrachet
- **Dom Pernot Belicard,** Puligny-Montrachet
- **Dom Elodie Roy,** Maranges
- **Dom Sérafin,** Gevrey-Chambertin
- **Dom Jean Tardy et Fils,** Vosne-Romanée
- **Dom Tessier,** Meursault
- **Dom Tollot-Beaut,** Chorey-lès-Beaune
- **Dom Tupinier-Bautista,** Mercurey

FOR TASTING NOTES, SCORES AND SUGGESTED DRINKING WINDOWS FOR INDIVIDUAL WINES SEE JANCISROBINSON.COM

season. Almost as soon as one fungicide was administered, it was washed off the vines, which then required another round of spraying. According to Mark Haisma, who professed himself "delighted, at least, that we managed to get to harvest and did actually harvest something", average annual rainfall records were smashed only halfway through the year.

Vines at the soggy foot of the Côte d'Or, the "golden slope" that's home to Burgundy's most famous vineyards, tended to suffer more than those higher up, where some of the rain drained away downhill.

One after another, vignerons who had previously committed themselves to organic viticulture decided to abandon that path in favour of more effective systemic sprays, simply to save their crop. Thibaud Clerget of Yvon Clerget told me he managed to stick to his organic principles only by going through the vineyard with permitted treatments 16 times – far more than usual. Elsewhere in the Côte de Beaune, Matthew Hayes, Burgundy specialist for JancisRobinson.com, reported that the much-admired Pierre-Yves Colin-Morey of Chassagne-Montrachet managed "respectable" yields of as much as 35 to 40 hl/ha (average in most years, but unusually high for 2024), by abandoning his usual organic preparations early on.

Admittedly, the Côte de Beaune, with its greater reliance on Chardonnay, was slightly better off than the Côte de Nuits in the northern half of the Côte d'Or. There were widespread reports of potential red wine crop losses of up to 80 per cent, with the white wine crop down by up to 30 per cent.

Late August brought a little respite. The grapes that had escaped mildew and rot benefited from slightly warmer weather, which raised their sugar levels. But the alcohol content in the resulting wines is unusually low, often less than 13 per cent. Uncharacteristically for this warmer century, many vignerons felt compelled to add a little sugar before or during fermentation to increase the final alcohol level.

Thanks to the cool summer, and the grapes' struggle to ripen, acid levels in the resulting wines, reds as well as whites, are high.

The most successful reds could be described as pretty, but never as concentrated; and in some examples this seemed to accentuate the acidity and made the wines taste a bit raw. They are relatively pale, with tannins barely perceptible, and some wines already seemed dangerously evolved. A vintage to drink relatively early, then – if you can afford to buy it.

> Some wines already seemed dangerously evolved. This is a vintage to drink relatively early – if you can afford to buy it

IF 2024 HAD BEEN A GENEROUS CROP, THERE MIGHT have been some hope of a reduction in the sky-high prices of burgundy we have seen in recent years but the fact that 2025 is also a relatively small vintage has kept prices more or less stable.

The paucity of grapes made life difficult in many a cellar. Tanks that would usually be full for the fermentation were only half-full or less. This increases the risk of oxidation, microbial infection or, the vigneron's nightmare, a stuck fermentation (where the yeast stops converting sugars into alcohol prematurely). In recent years, many producers have been cutting back on the proportion of new oak they use because oaky

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FIRST SIP

HOW TO MAKE WINE RED

Dark-skinned grapes are essential because all the red colour (and tannins, and much of the flavour) is in the grapes' skins. Apart from a few unusual red-fleshed grape varieties known as teinturiers, the flesh of all grape varieties, whatever the colour of their skins, is a sort of greyish green.

It is therefore essential to encourage the skins to yield these important ingredients into the must, as the dense, fermenting grape juice is known. Optimising the leaching of just enough colour, tannins and flavour during fermentation is much of what modern red winemaking is all about. In the fermentation vat, a thick "cap" of grape skins rises to the top and extraction may be encouraged by pumping the must over the cap, or plunging the cap into the must by various means.

Once the fermentation is complete and the winemaker decides there has been enough contact between the skins and the must, the young wine is separated from ("racked off") the skins. The thick mass of skins remaining in the fermentation vat is then pressed to release particularly tannic, deeply coloured, so-called press wine. The winemaker decides how much of it, if any, to blend into the young wine before it is aged in barrels, larger casks, vats or tanks before bottling.

wines are so unfashionable. And anyway, the 2024 fruit was hardly robust enough to handle the impact of new oak. But for wines, such as grands and some premiers crus, for which a higher-than-average proportion of new oak barrels are customarily employed, there were instances of having to use as much as 50 per cent, simply because there was only enough wine to fill two barrels.

One of the major operations in red winemaking is extraction, persuading dark-skinned grapes to release colour and flavour from the skins (see below). Grégory Patriat, Jean-Claude Boisset's winemaker, who seems to have managed to make a fist of what he called his "garage wines" because quantities were so small, observed that in the cellar the danger with the 2024s was "to try to extract what wasn't there".

In Burgundy, and with Pinot Noir vinifications in general, there has been a fixation on the proportion of whole bunches, or whole clusters, of grapes, that go into the fermentation vat rather than being destemmed. The stems and bunches can usefully aerate the fermenting must and can add freshness to the resulting wine, especially if the stems haven't turned from green to brown (which Patriat claims hardly ever happens in Burgundy).

Because Chardonnay grapes were less affected by 2024's vicissitudes, white burgundies – ever popular according to UK wine merchants – are more widely available than reds, even if they also tend to taste brisk – sorry, "classic" and "precise" – rather than generous.

Despite all this doom and gloom about the 2024s, and their paucity, London's customarily hectic week of burgundy tastings took place as usual this month with what felt like as many different samples as ever – presumably spurred by the UK merchants' desire for cash – even if the available quantities of each wine were presumably much smaller than usual. Quite a few of the tastings included numerous older vintages as well, indicating a certain resistance to burgundy price levels among the merchants' customers.

One important thing to note, however, is that the vineyards south of the Côte d'Or – in the Côte Chalonnaise, the Mâconnais and Beaujolais – suffered far less in 2024 and quantities produced there were much more generous. It's also true that the wines from these regions, less widely shown in London than the Côte d'Or classics, are not just generally much cheaper than those from the Côte d'Or, they have also become significantly more sophisticated in recent years. For 2024s, head south for value.

The most successful producers I encountered in the nine tastings I attended are listed here but my colleagues tasted at 10. All our tasting notes are on JancisRobinson.com.

Review

The Highland Laddie, Leeds

by JAY RAYNER

ILLUSTRATION *by* DANIEL EGNEUS

The Highland Laddie, a red-brick wedge of an old Leeds boozer out beyond the ring road, looks like the plucky hero in a movie about rapacious urban development. It's surrounded by fiercely modern blocks of student flats clad in panelling of mud brown or khaki that merge with a winter sky as grey as the North Sea. Then there's the Laddie, at the end of a knackered road to nowhere, looking like some dogged old timer who simply refused to quit. You have to root for it.

Apparently, there were plans to turn the building into a vape shop, but the team behind the Empire Cafe in the centre of Leeds, renowned for its rotisserie chicken, had other ideas. The landlord asked them how they would attract students. "We told them we weren't going to try," chef-proprietor Sam Pullan says. His plan was to create something that would be irresistible to an older crowd of romantics; to those who wanted a pub that looks like it smells of wet dog but doesn't; which has local beers and offers a sausage roll, which exceeds expectations. It would be a drinker's pub, but also an eater's pub; a place which understands tradition without being tediously handcuffed to it. They would create a destination in a location no one in their right mind would ever think of visiting.

That is exactly what they've done. The Laddie, as it's now being called, answers all those miserable

FIND IT

THE HIGHLAND LADDIE

36-38 Cavendish St
Leeds LS3 1LY
highlandladdie.com

Snacks £3-£11
Larger dishes £8-£30
Desserts £3-£10

questions about whether a pub is actually a restaurant in disguise, by making them feel irrelevant.

I will confess to carrying a backpack full of hand-tooled biases into the saloon bar. I was a student in Leeds in the 1980s and, while not much of a pubgoer today, my student years were measured out in sticky carpets and frothy pints and hours lost in buildings that looked a lot like this one. But it feels like a pub which has grown up with me. Sure, there is Timothy Taylor's, and Three Swords from the Kirkstall Brewery on tap, but the mirror behind the bar is also scribbled with promising words like "oysters", which are shucked in front of you, and "champagne, £10 a glass".

The front room is all bar. The back room, with its wood-burning stove, guttering gently, and its vintage Tetley Beer mirrors, has space for about 20 at high-tops and at small, round, dark wood tables of the sort too many of us used to huddle over back in the day.

Each one quickly becomes home this afternoon to a tall bowl of thick-cut dark-golden chips, inserted vertically so it looks like a quiver full of the best sort of arrows. On the side is their own curry sauce, which is sweet and spiced and on nodding terms with the industrial without quite going there.

The sausage roll brings a dense meaty cylinder of porkiness, wrapped with the sort of pastry lamination, ribbed for extra pleasure, that you see in Instagram reels from Parisian boulangeries trying to make you hit "Follow". Of course it's accompanied by their own tamarind-rich brown sauce. But there are also vindaloo devilled eggs with a turban of spiced, creamed yolk. It's a 1970s classic with the safety catch off. This is not a place in which to pursue January's good and healthy intentions. It's a place for joyfully falling off the wagon.

THERE ARE MANY THINGS I WANT TO order. A neighbouring table gets the thick-cut smoked lamb belly ribs in a "lamb Marmite glaze", which look like they would cheerily glaze your cheeks too. A golden, undulating schnitzel is the size of a dinner plate and comes with two fried eggs and the offer of many salted anchovies to make it a Wiener Holstein. Do say yes to the anchovies. Or how about a keema shepherd's pie with poppadom mash and carrot pickle?

The most cheffy of the dishes we do order is a pile of Jerusalem artichokes, roasted until almost toffee-ed, with crinkles of deep-fried kale, crisp oyster mushrooms, porcini ketchup and a black truffle vinaigrette. Or there's a slab of hot smoked sea trout, with a sweet-salty crust, on a Dijon-friendly roulade sauce, with golden beetroot chutney and a lightly oiled wafer of toast.

Some of the food is purely comforting. A side dish of "brothy peas" is not, as I at first assumed, some Yorkshire dialect take on marrowfat peas which happened to be new to me. It's garden peas in a broth, with white beans and cabbage, hinged somewhere between a soup and a stew. It's extraordinarily meaty for something not involving meat.

But the must-have is the lyrically described "Sliced ham from the fire, dinner roll, butter & mustard". It starts with the delivery of a laminated mustard menu. There's Colman's or Taylors English, Grey Poupon wholegrain and five types of Dijon, among others. More restaurants should have mustard menus. We are pointed at the Händlmaier Sweet Bavarian, a jar of which is delivered to the table. It eases the cheek-pink slices of still warm, thick-cut salty ham on their way as I fold them into the sweet springy block of bread with its butter-brushed crust. It is a dish ripped gently from the pages of *The Darling Buds of May* and made heavenly reality.

Desserts include a trifle made with whisky custard and, keeping to a theme, a crème caramel topped with sticky toffee sauce and "rum soaked date". At the end, the bill comes with a couple of Fruit Salad sweets, a '70s classic. It's a shameless clapback to an imaginary back-in-the-day, for nothing then was ever as good as this. But let's not quibble with wonky nostalgia. Let's just celebrate a present which has found space for the Highland Laddie amid the high-rise clutter.

jay.rayner@ft.com

PHOTOGRAPHY *by* ANDY SEWELL • STYLING *by* GEORGIA RUDD

Cullen skink, but not as you know it

Every January we host a raucous Burns Night supper at our house. The meal starts with cullen skink. This hearty haddock and potato soup is exactly the sort of food that makes the heart sing in the depths of winter. It is also mush, as are the haggis, neeps and tatties that follow. I once suggested adding broccoli or a salad for a bit of texture but was denied on the grounds of authenticity. "There is nothing green in Scotland in January," my Scottish husband said.

My solution this year comes from chef Brian Grigor: a home-cook-friendly version of a cullen skink-inspired scallop dish that he serves at Eòrna restaurant in Edinburgh. "Scottish scallops are the best in the world, so I wanted to showcase them with the flavours of another traditional dish," he says. "I love the sweetness of the leeks combined with the smoky flavour of the fish and burnt leek oil."
Niki Blasina, FT Globetrotter deputy editor

DRINK
A good Kabinett will blossom alongside smoky flavours, says Eòrna co-founder and sommelier Glen Montgomery. Look for one of around 10-11 per cent ABV. It will be just-off-dry, with a little sweetness to flatter the scallop and acidity to refresh the palate against the purée.

SUBSTITUTIONS
If unable to find good-quality scallops, you can use 100g of pan-fried halibut or cod per person. Use regular rapeseed oil if you can't get cold pressed.

TIP
Clean and dry the scallops (or ask the fishmonger to) and place them in a container, uncovered, in the fridge to air dry for 24 hours. The drier the scallops are before cooking, the better the caramelisation will be.

BRIAN GRIGOR'S SCALLOP 'CULLEN SKINK'

TO SERVE FOUR
AS A STARTER

For the scallops
- 4 large hand-dived scallops (or 12 medium scallops)
- 1 tbs olive oil or rapeseed oil
- Pinch of salt
- 30g unsalted butter, cubed

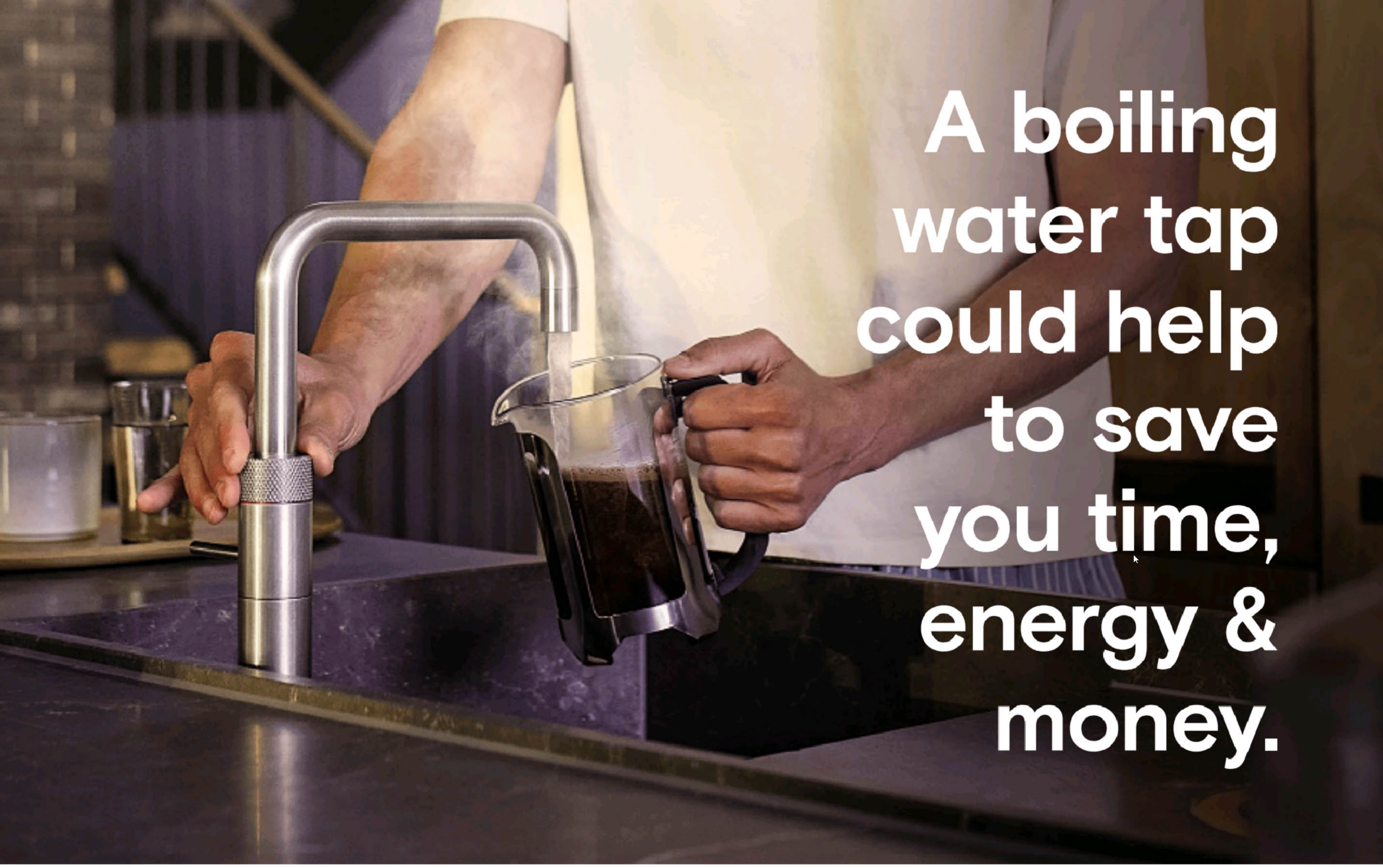
For the purée
- 150g shallots, thinly sliced
- 250g leeks, thinly sliced
- 70ml olive oil
- 250ml whole milk
- 200g potatoes, peeled and diced into 1cm cubes
- 100g smoked haddock (not yellow-dyed), diced
- 100ml double cream

For the burnt leek oil
- 1 large leek, split into quarters lengthways
- 200ml cold-pressed rapeseed oil

For the smoked haddock flakes
- 200ml cold-pressed rapeseed oil
- 200g smoked haddock (not yellow-dyed)

1. Make the purée. Sweat the sliced shallots and leeks in olive oil over a medium heat without taking on any colour until soft, about 10 minutes. Add the milk, potatoes and haddock and simmer until soft, around 20 minutes. Drain off the milk and reserve it on the side, then add the shallot, leek, haddock and potato mixture back into your pot. Add the double cream and blend with a hand blender (or pour into a blender) until smooth. If it's too thick, you can loosen it with a bit of the haddock milk.
2. Heat the oven to 220C. Place the split leek and rapeseed oil on a non-stick tray and cook in the oven for around 10-15 minutes, until you have a good dark burnt colour on the leeks. Leave to cool. Pass the oil through a fine sieve and reserve until ready to serve.
3. Make the haddock flakes. In a small pot, heat the rapeseed oil to around 52C (this is far lower than frying temperature) and add the whole piece of haddock. Cover and turn off the hob or leave in a warm place for around 10-12 minutes to cook off the heat (it will be opaque when ready). Flake the haddock into large pieces and reserve until ready to serve.
4. Remove your scallops from the fridge 10 minutes before cooking to allow them to come up to room temperature. Heat oil in a non-stick pan over high heat, season the scallops and fry on one side until golden (around two minutes for large scallops, one minute for smaller scallops). Turn over and reduce the heat to medium. Add the butter and continually baste the scallops until they are just cooked in the middle (about three to four minutes total for large scallops, around two minutes for smaller). Heat the purée and place in the bowl first, then add the smoked haddock flakes on top of the purée, followed by the cooked scallops. Lightly drizzle with the leek oil. Serve with quickly sautéed baby spinach.

NEXT WEEK – A WINTER LUNCH AT UPDOWN FARMHOUSE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WHERE TO EAT TACOS IN LONDON

by EDSON DIAZ-FUENTES

SWANKY ↑ HIERARCHY OF PLEASURES ↓ SIMPLE

Nobu, Marylebone
I used to visit the branch in Shoreditch all the time. I love the wagyu beef taco, which comes topped with caviar. There's a reason it's so famous – it's such a beautiful mixture of textures and flavours, crunchy, creamy and full of umami. Obviously, it's not what some might call "authentic" Mexican food and it's not cheap either. But it's a wonderful tribute to Mexico by former chef Paolo Della Corte.

KOL, Marylebone
Every time I go to KOL, I have the langoustine taco. The toppings may change but it never disappoints. You could call it British-Mexican – it's untraditional, a step away from classic Mexican tacos. But the food is light, delicious and really interesting. Santiago Lastra doesn't do many tacos, but the few he does are amazing. Well worth the money.

Zapote, Shoreditch
If I can't get a seat at my own taquería, I go round the corner to Zapote for one of my favourites from chef Yahir Gonzalez. His version of an ox-tongue taco genuinely transports me back to Mexico. It's a brilliant dish, full of flavour. And it's only £10. A great quick lunch.

Sonora Taquería, Stoke Newington
This taquería is up there with the very best in London. It really lives up to the hype. I usually get the marinated pork and grilled pineapple taco – and it's the only time I would accept a flour tortilla with this combination. The cooking is incredible. I've also tried the ox tongue taco with white onion and coriander, which works too.

Tortilla, branches across town
This might be surprising, but I quite like the fast-casual restaurant chain's chicken pibil taco. It's convenient, easy and accessible. I ignore the cheese and sour cream and just have it with pickled onions and salsa roja.

As told to Josh Barrie.
Edson Diaz-Fuentes is chef-founder of Santo Remedio

INSIDER'S NOTEBOOK

Pop! Goes the pop-up chef circuit

by PANAYIOTA SOUTIS

ILLUSTRATION *by* ALICE PIAGGIO

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO, AN INDUSTRY FRIEND crowned me the "pop-up king" when explaining my work at a party. At the time, I curated the chef programme at Carousel in central London, which hosts chefs from around the world, and connected up-and-comers to various venues. Though flattered, I rejected the title. I didn't want to be monarch of this imperfect kingdom, one whose flaws have only worsened since.

London has a long history of welcoming guest chefs, thanks to programmes such as those at Carousel and previously P. Franco. When P. Franco opened in Clapton in 2014, chefs cooked in situ for several months and the relationship was symbiotic: the talent gained a space of their own and the venue could shout about hosting the coolest cooks. It was a smarter and more sustainable approach compared to the pop-up churn of today.

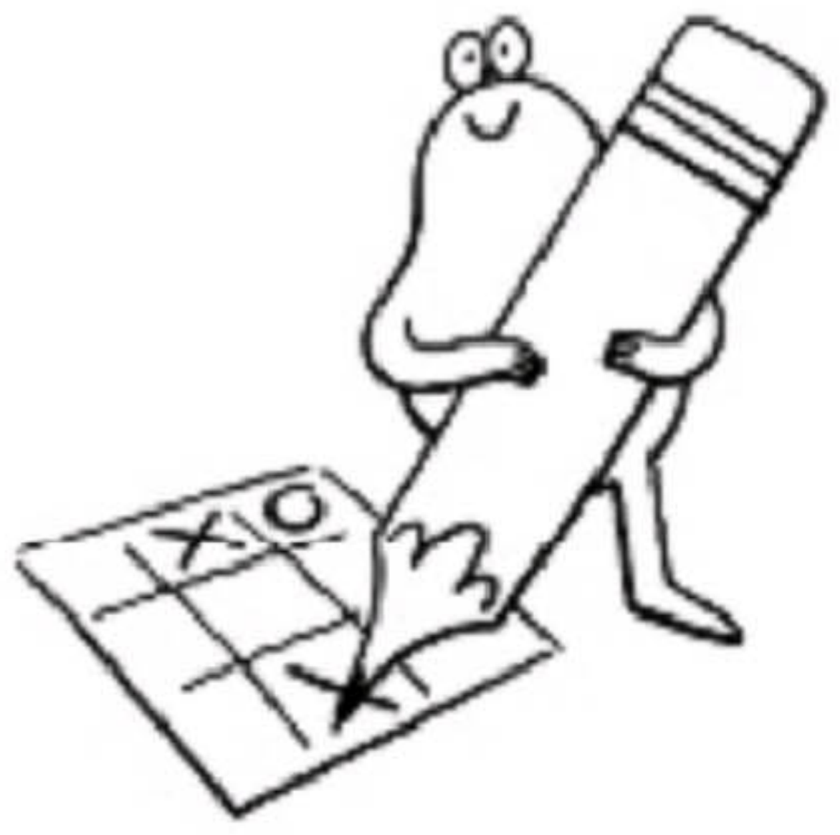
During the pandemic, more chefs experimented with cooking beyond the traditional kitchen. With more people roaming, more host venues appeared. The pop-up went mainstream. For ambitious cooks, a hype-generating circuit emerged, stretching from Chenin in Bangkok to Ivresse in Marseille. But gradually, these partnerships began to erode, with chefs accepting terrible financial deals for exposure, while venues "shuffled [them] like songs on a playlist", to quote food writer Jenny Lau.

Thankfully, short stints no longer add up: cycling through talent is pricier than maintaining a team full time and food costs skyrocket when methods change weekly. Nor do they serve the diner. What appeals now is one-night-only experiences, like two chefs collaborating, or the familiarity found in a longer-term residency.

Will Gee, owner of 107 (P. Franco's successor), chose to rebel against the pop-up churn back in 2023. As Elliot Hashtroudi, the first resident chef in the space, explains: "A longer residency gives you time to develop your ideas, and people can gauge what you're doing." It also builds loyalty. Many of the regulars Hashtroudi now welcomes as head chef of Camille first ate his food during his six-month residency at 107.

Sadie Mae Burns of Ha's Đặc Biệt, the Vietnamese pop-up-turned-restaurants in New York, agrees: "Having regulars is one of the most special things." Ha's Đặc Biệt, which she co-founded with Anthony Ha, serves as a blueprint for how a globetrotting pop-up can grow into something long-lasting. But crucially, before opening their first restaurant, the duo spent several months cooking at Early June and Le Bistrot Tontine in Paris, bolstering their repertoire and fanbase.

Such triumphs show that great cooking takes time, which is why we're in the middle of a residency renaissance. Pop-ups prove what a chef can do, but residencies allow them to explain why they do it – while being more cost-effective (and less exhausting) for everyone involved.



GAMES

MINI CROSSWORD

NO 93 SET BY XELA

8 clues
2 straightforward
2 general knowledge
2 cryptic
2 anagrams

1		2		3		4
	■		■		■	
5						
	■		■		■	
6						
	■		■		■	
7						

ACROSS

1 Back an actor in a minor role (7)
5 Eric ___, Derek and the Dominos guitarist (7)
6 Slippery (7)
7 Unit of electric conductance (7)

DOWN

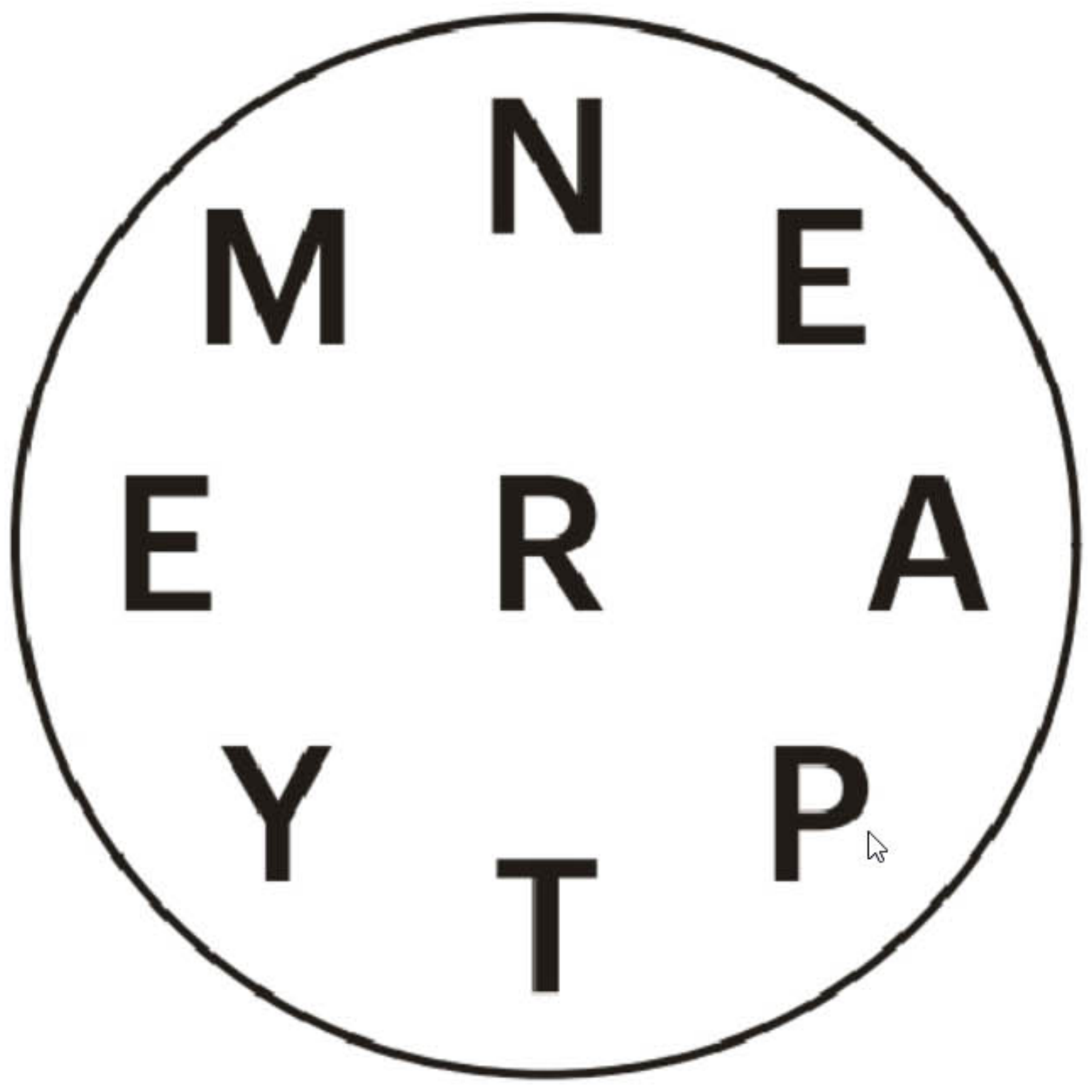
1 Triumph (7)
2 Pale cat (7)
3 Elution (7)
4 Offers strips of chicken (7)

Access FT crosswords from the past 30 days – Cryptic, Polymath, Weekend and Sunday Puzzles – on ft.com/crosswordapp

WORD CIRCLE

NO 93

How many words can you form that use the centre letter plus two or more of the other letters? No letter may be used more times than it appears within the circle. There is one word that uses all nine letters.



SCORING
GOOD – 40
GREAT – 50
AMAZING – 70

BINARY PUZZLE

NO 93

Place 0 or 1 in every empty square so there is an equal number of each digit in every row and column. In any row or column, there must be no more than two of the same digit in succession.

0	0		0	1			
1		0			1	1	
			0			1	
				0	1		
		1	1				
	1			1			
	1	0			1		0
			1	0		1	0

©ANY PUZZLE MEDIA LTD

THIS WEEK'S QUIZ ANSWERS

A round on the links

The link was answers containing repeated words
1. *Who's Who* 2. Baden-Baden 3. Laa-Laa
4. "James James" ("Morrison Morrison")
5. Lord Haw Haw 6. *All's Well that Ends Well*
7. Boutros Boutros-Ghali (Egypt)
8. *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* 9. Duran Duran
10. Neville Neville (Phil and Gary)

The picture round

Greg Davies + Margaret Rutherford = Greg Rutherford

SOLUTIONS

FOR ISSUE DATE JANUARY 17

Mini Crossword No 92

S	A	P	P	O	R	O
A	■	I	■	U	■	B
C	O	A	S	T	A	L
K	■	S	■	L	■	I
F	I	T	T	I	N	G
U	■	R	■	N	■	E
L	O	I	T	E	R	S

Binary Puzzle No 92

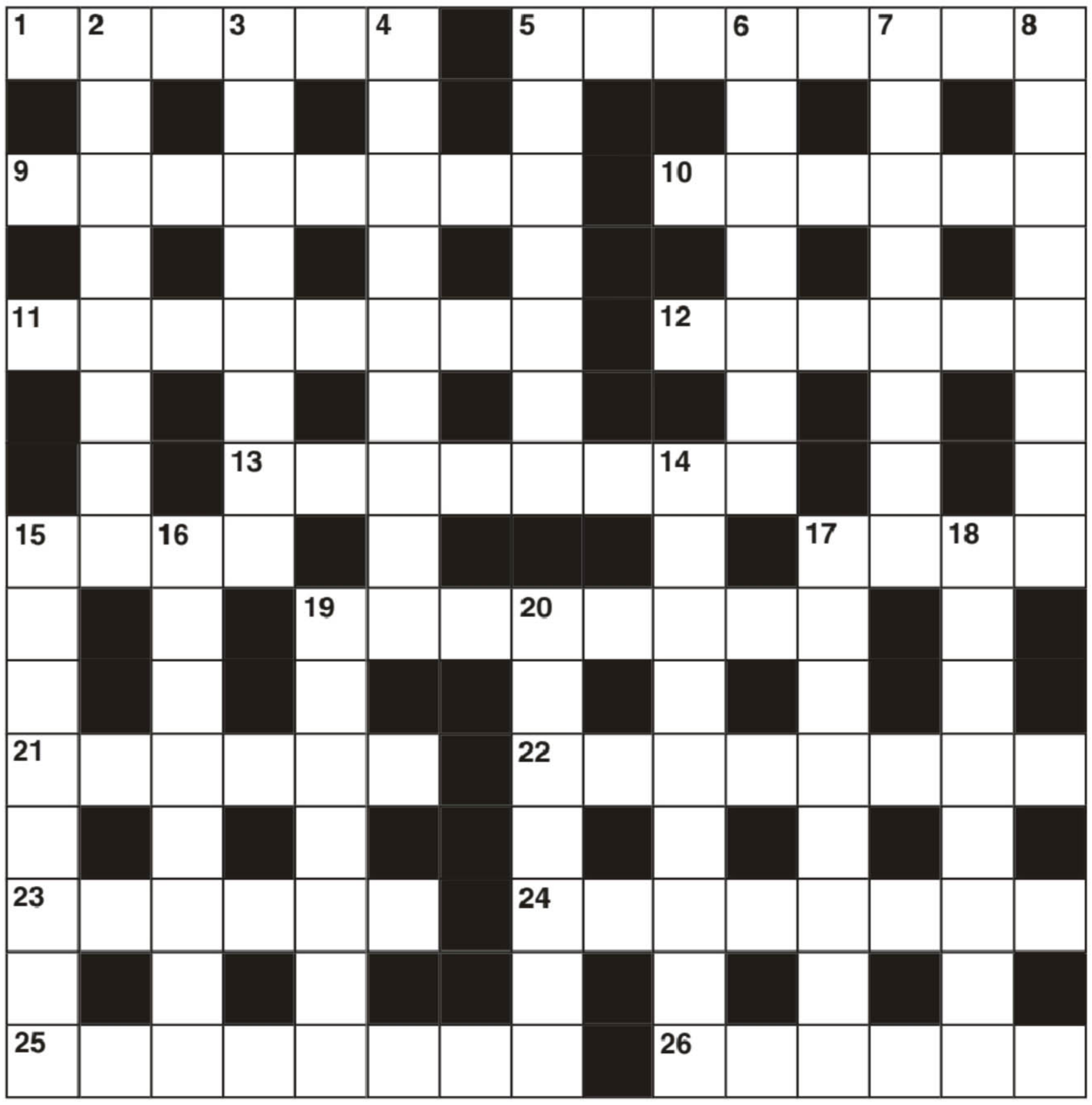
1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
0	0	1	0	1	1	0	1
0	1	1	0	1	0	1	0
1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
0	1	1	0	1	1	0	0
0	0	1	1	0	1	0	1
1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0
1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0

Word Circle No 92

acetic, ail, alien, anti, antic, cacti, calcine, calcite, canticle, **catchline**, chain, chalice, chi, chic, chicle, chin, china, cinch, cite, cliche, client, clinch, entail, ethic, ethical, ethnic, hail, hectic, hie, hilt, hint, hit, ice, inch, inhale, inlet itch, lactic, lain, lei, lice, lichen, lie, line, lint, lit, lithe, nail, nice, niche, nil, nit, tail, **technical**, thin, thine, tie, tile, tin, tine

THE CROSSWORD

NO 777 SET BY ALDHELM



The Across clues are straightforward, while the Down clues are cryptic.

ACROSS

1 Affix, stick (6)
5 Tyrannical (8)
9 Nicaragua's northern neighbour (8)
10 Self-evident cliché (6)
11 One who's not present (8)
12 Climb (6)
13 Mixed drink (8)
15 Indolent (4)
17 Excessive publicity (4)
19 Profusion, glut (8)
21 Hope, dream (6)
22 Remake (8)
23 Anger, incense (6)
24 To do with business and money (8)
25 One of mythical Jason's followers (8)
26 Female sibling (6)

DOWN

2 Upset by awful debut – role cut short (8)
3 Formal interview with dean I organised outside university church (8)
4 Unorthodox cleric endlessly tormented with hate (9)
5 Take apart sides destroyed by leaders of cricket tournament (7)
6 Summer cover each year – second element of premium's also adjusted (7)
7 Work hard with hygiene, ultimately, and sample soap, perhaps (8)
8 Came to, so befuddled and very drowsy (8)
14 Club put out German decoration (4, 5)
15 Secretly arrived in stormy rain (2, 6)
16 Game of crazy golf – par score, finally (4-4)
17 Those without safe places get out heartlessly (4-4)
18 Fate left in long story (8)
19 Ideal sound system with organ arrangement (7)
20 Fast flow almost ripped and ripped (7)

Crossword No 776

G	A	R	A	G	E	■	S	C	U	F	F	L	E	D
A	■	E	■	R	■	■	■	O	■	A	■	E	■	I
M	E	N	I	A	L	■	I	N	S	T	A	N	C	E
E	■	D	■	V	■	A	■	S	■	I	■	I	■	S
S	T	I	P	E	N	D	■	I	N	G	E	N	U	E
H	■	T	■	L	■	M	■	D	■	U	■	■	■	L
O	V	I	D	■	C	O	H	E	R	E	N	T	■	■
W	■	O	■	■	■	N	■	R	■	■	■	H	■	P
■	■	N	A	U	T	I	C	A	L	■	N	E	A	R
C	■	■	■	N	■	S	■	B	■	W	■	R	■	O
R	E	M	A	T	C	H	■	L	E	O	P	A	R	D
I	■	I	■	W	■	M	■	E	■	N	■	P	■	I
M	I	L	L	I	N	E	R	■	S	T	R	I	N	G
E	■	A	■	S	■	N	■	■	■	O	■	S	■	A
A	N	N	O	T	A	T	E	■	I	N	S	T	I	L

ALAMY; GETTY IMAGES

A ROUND ON THE LINKS

BY JAMES WALTON

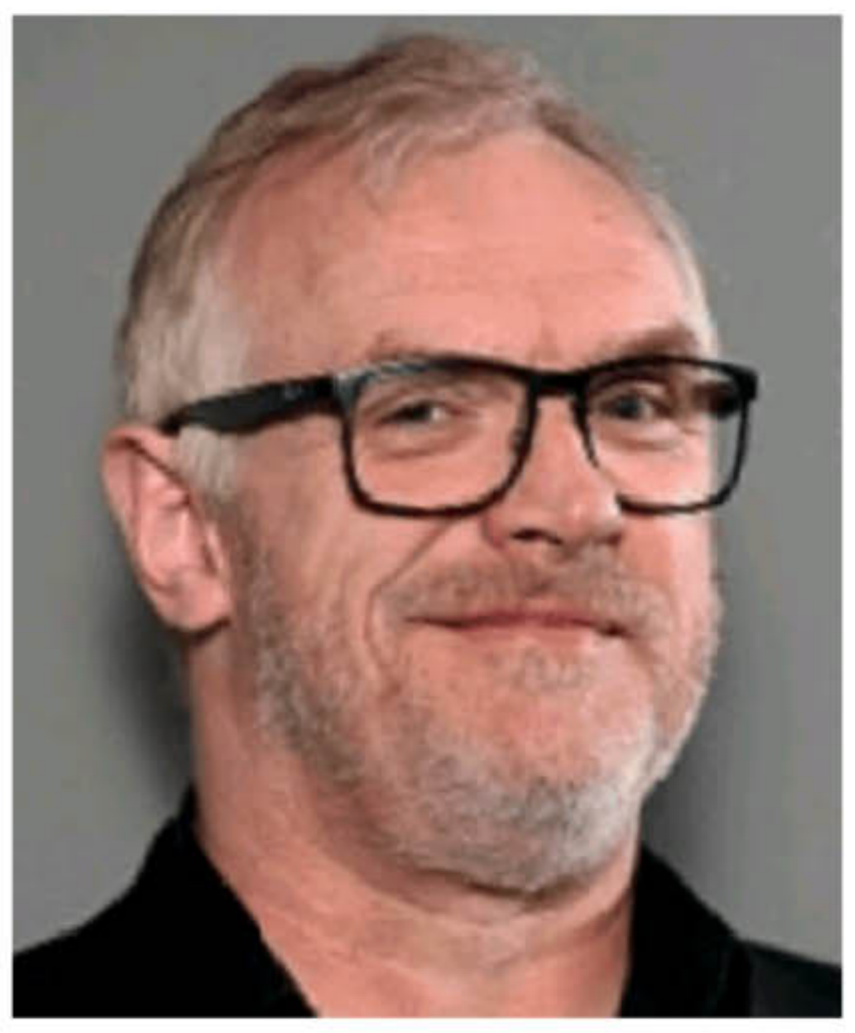
All the answers here are linked in some way. Once you've spotted the connection, any you didn't know the first time around should become easier.

1 Henry Robert Addison was the first editor of which reference book?
2 Which German spa town lies on the river Oos?
3 Which of the Teletubbies (*pictured*) is yellow?
4 What's the first line of AA Milne's poem "Disobedience"?
5 What was the nickname of the last person in Britain to be executed for treason, in 1946?
6 Which Shakespeare play comes first alphabetically?
7 Who was the first UN secretary-general from an African country?
8 In which 1968 film does Baron Bomburst rule the land of Vulgaria?
9 In the 1980s, which bestselling band had three members with the surname Taylor, none of whom were brothers?
10 Who was the father of the two brothers who won winners' medals with Manchester United in the 1999 European Champions League?

THE PICTURE ROUND

BY JAMES WALTON

Who or what do these pictures add up to?



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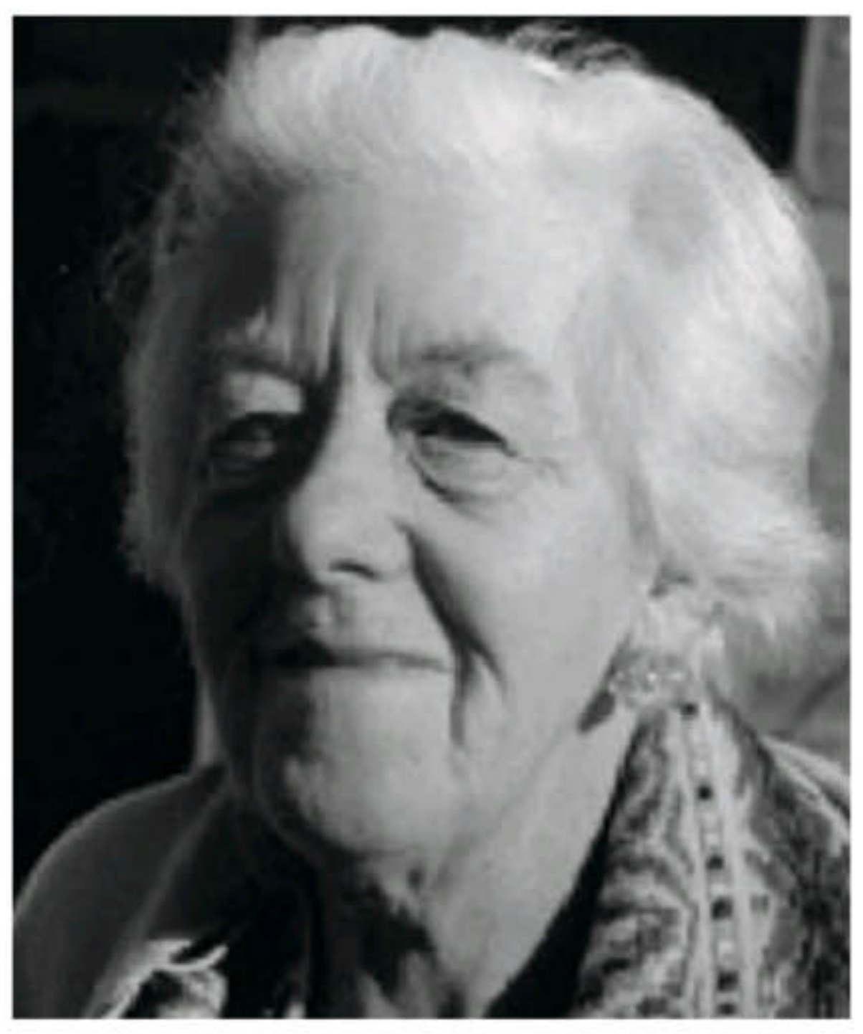

= ?

Answers opposite

What Fresh Hell

Do I still have to give up my seat on trains?

Work, life and family dilemmas solved by *Robert Shrimsley*

ILLUSTRATION *by* LUCAS VARELA

The unthinkable happened last week. Someone offered me their seat on a train. It was very nice of them, of course, but rather distressing all the same. Being told you look of an age to be offered a seat is surely akin to a non-pregnant woman being asked when the baby is due.

I do not think I look in any way decrepit or unstable on my feet. I'm not entirely sure I even look my age. My hair remains dark and pretty thick, though the flecks of grey are making strategic incursions - apparently only in support of the local grey population, which was facing discrimination.

I can only put the gesture down to the fact that I was wearing an old-fashioned hat, a Borsalino, a version of a fedora, which I wear when it is cold and which, I will have you know, Google AI states is "often associated with sophistication". This not only covered my screamingly youthful hair, but it is possible that what AI understands to be sophistication was misinterpreted by a well-meaning but clearly unfashionable commuter as a sign of old age. Naturally, I laughed away the need for this gesture, thanking her but voicing in mock horror my surprise that she had thought this necessary for such a fine physical specimen as myself.

Even so, the nerve of this woman who decided I had moved into the needs-help category. I admit to holding an over-60 railcard, which gives me largely free travel in London, a ridiculous universal bung to many people who do not need it. But that is simple economics; it ought not to denote a man in need of commuter philanthropy.

The irritating thing was that, since the train was packed, I did actually want the seat. I was at the start of a 40-minute commute in rush hour but at that moment a rash tactical desire to assert my continued health somehow took precedence over the strategic goal of sitting down. What foolish pride to spurn the offer when I could easily have concocted a bit of a hobble into the chair to spare my blushes. The story ended happily, however. She disembarked a couple of stops later and I was able to shove my way through to a sedentary commute.

> I believe in doing the right thing. On trains, I mainly believe in others doing it first

In general, I strongly support offering up one's seat to those more in need. Of course you should stand for the old, the infirm, pregnant women and perhaps people laden with kids. But speaking personally, after decades of doing the right thing I am ready to pass this torch to a new generation.

I will still offer my seat, though with an increasing sense of irritation as I look at the rows of twenty- and thirtysomethings plugged into their phones, resolutely refusing to look up – or, worse still, looking up but indifferent to the old woman or the person with crutches.

Now, I hold back for a few seconds just to see if someone else is ready to step up. I still firmly believe in doing the right thing, you understand. It's just that on trains I mainly believe in others doing it first. I have, as an additional safeguard, taken to avoiding the seats near the door where there is a greater moral obligation to get up for those in need.

It rankles to think I will be standing when others far younger are still not minded to act. As I resignedly make the offer I want to bellow, "I've put in 40 years of this. It's your bloody turn."

The sad realisation of this lady's offer is that I am in a new and under-served category, a middle stage where I may not merit being offered a seat but ought not to be obliged to surrender mine. There ought to be a badge for that. "Exempt from chivalry" or "Big baby on board". Recognition of this status allows the wearer to accept offers of a seat without admitting any liability or frailty on their own part. The gesture is made purely out of generational respect.

The upshot of this long dark night of the soul on the Underground is that I now believe I was wrong not to take the seat offered to me. People should be encouraged to be thoughtful, even if on this occasion it was possibly to the benefit of the wrong person. A virtuous act should be accepted and the seat-vacater allowed to enjoy the feeling of having done a good deed.

So, look, if you see me in future, don't spare my feelings. FT

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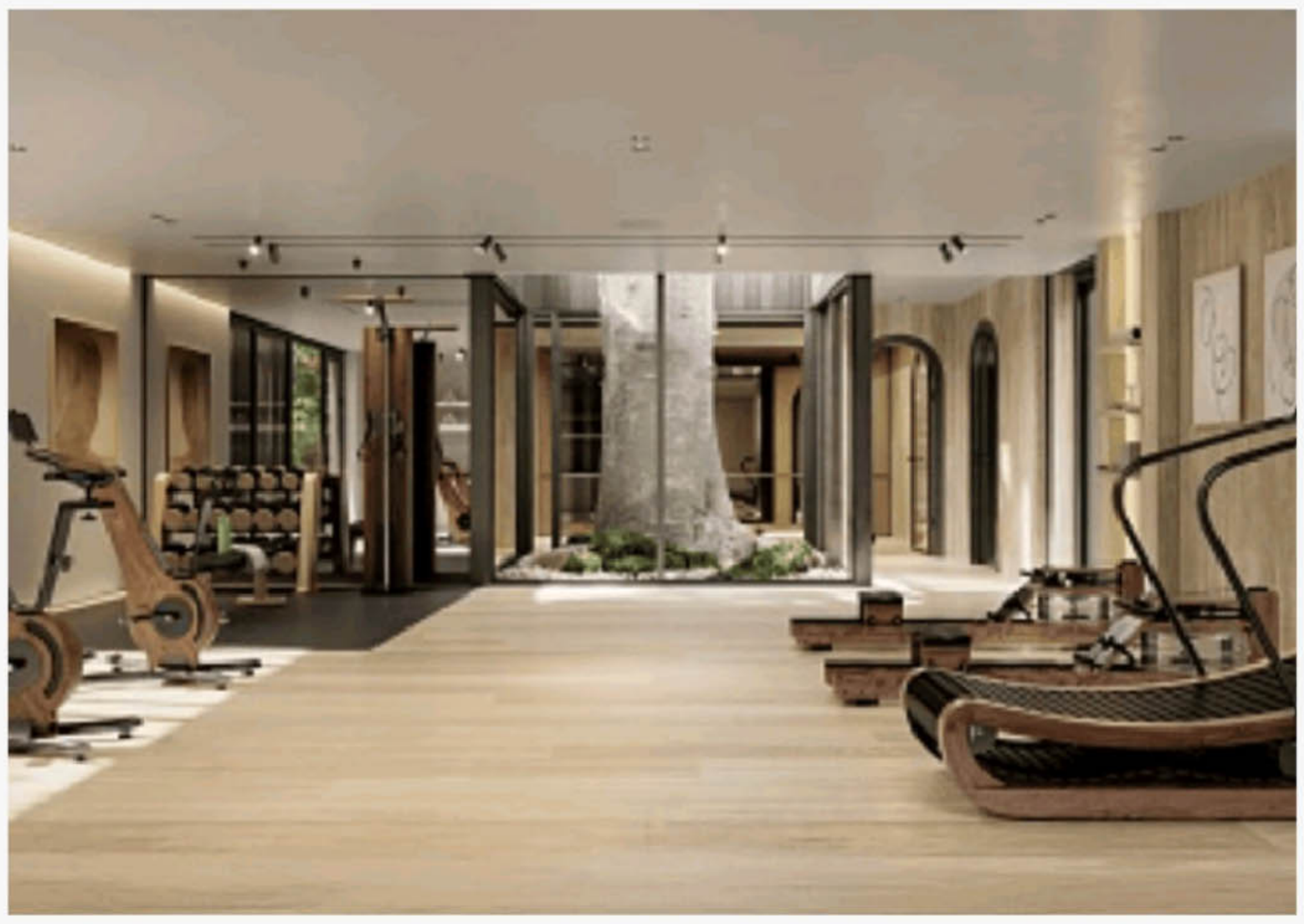

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